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Sri Aurobindo

VOLUME TWO



SRI AUROBINDO INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE OF EDUCATION
PONDICHERRY

Sri Aurobindo

a biography and a history

Volume Two

by

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VOLUME TWO



Sri Aurobindo

PART III

PILGRIM OF ETERNITY

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHANDERNAGORE: INN OF TRANQUILLITY

I

Ever since his acquittal in the Alipur case — a turn of events not at all to the Government's liking — Sri Aurobindo had repeated intimations from divers sources that he was a "marked" man still, that the Damocles' sword might fall on him any day. Once before — twice before — he had been prosecuted without a "scrap of reliable evidence"; he had been acquitted on both occasions, but the acquittal was no insurance against the risk of a fresh prosecution on equally flimsy evidence or of arbitrary deportation by a devious recourse to the Regulation of 1818. In the eyes of the Government, Sri Aurobindo was an unrepentant seditionist and revolutionary, only a diabolically clever one since it was so very difficult to bring him to book. So soon after acquittal, he had started the *Karmayogin* and then the *Dharma*, and both were financial successes. He was constantly on his feet, and his speeches were widely reported and discussed. He still seemed to exert an unparalleled influence on the young men who met or read or heard him, he was still listened to with consideration and respect by many of the seasoned politicians. Everything he did, everything he said, was news! It wasn't surprising, therefore, that Government's uneasiness mounted week by week, day by day.

Of course, there was of late a new accent in his speeches and writings — what might be called the Uttarpara accent. God, God — Sanatana Dharma, Eternal Religion! What did he mean? Did he expect people to take him

seriously? But when Sri Aurobindo spoke against the Reforms, when he fulminated against the ways of the bureaucracy, when he crammed indictments into his insinuations — the rapier thrust, the sharp edge, the needle point were seen again, the weapons often envenomed too! The talk of God, Sanatana Dharma, prison *sādhana* was, perhaps, no more than a smoke-screen for the arch-revolutionary's dangerous strategies of disaffection and insurrection. Was the Government to sit with folded hands, leaving him free to do his nefarious work? There was serious thought in high Government circles, and the *Karmayogin* articles were read between the lines, and sinister meanings were discovered that were never intended, and could never have been.

The floating rumours took a more concrete shape when Sister Nivedita, who had contacts with men in authority, spoke to Sri Aurobindo about the possibility of his imminent arrest or deportation. It was then, as we saw in the previous chapter, that he published his "Open Letter to My Countrymen" in the *Karmayogin* issue of 31 July 1909. That letter was to serve the double purpose of clarifying the political situation of the day and suggesting a comprehensive six-point programme of action for the immediate future. And the "Letter" was to stand as his Last Will and Testament in case he was deported. The Nationalist party was not to worry or feel depressed if he didn't return from deportation; even in that eventuality, the country and the party would be led all the same, for the God-anointed leader would surely come in good time:

All great movements wait for their God-sent leader, the willing channel of His force, and only when He comes, move forward triumphantly to

their fulfilment. The men who have led hitherto have been strong men of high gifts and commanding genius, great enough to be the protagonists of any other movement, but even they were not sufficient to fulfil one which is the chief current of a world-wide revolution. Therefore the Nationalist party, custodians of the future, must wait for the man who is to come, calm in the midst of calamity, hopeful under defeat, sure of eventual emergence and triumph and always mindful of the responsibility which they owe not only to their Indian posterity but to the world.¹

The movement of Indian independence (*svarāj*) was to be part of a world-wide revolution. The rediscovery of India's soul was to be the prelude to the emergence of the world's soul, the soul of humanity. Thus, as Sri Aurobindo saw the problem of leadership, India's leader had to be — at least potentially — the world's leader as well.

In another article ('The Past and the Future'), which appeared in the *Karmayogin* of 25 September, Sri Aurobindo returned to the question of education, and discussed how Western education — at once compartmental (and hence partial, not integral), commercial and materialistic — had wrought in the course of less than one hundred years the destruction of native Indian sensibility, damaged beyond recognition India's preeminence in the plastic arts, and by snapping the life-links with the Past had "beggared the nation of the originality, high aspiration and forceful energy" without which no country could hope to become great. In its first flush, Nationalism had at least encouraged and embold-

¹ *Speeches*, pp. 138-9.

ened the people to throw off the miserable garbs of littleness, pettiness and petitioning, of tame subservience to the haughty alien, of meek acceptance of the role of the serf, or of an inferior race, or of perpetual subordination. The apocalyptic Vision of the Mother invoked by the *mantra* "Bande Mataram" had in the twinkling of an eye cleared the national atmosphere of the mists of mendicancy and despondency. This negative task already accomplished, there was still the far more difficult, the vastly more important, constructive task of national regeneration:

To raise the mind, character and tastes of the people, to recover the ancient nobility of temper, the strong Aryan character and the high Aryan outlook, the perceptions which made earthly life beautiful and wonderful, and the magnificent spiritual experiences, realisations and aspirations which made us the deepest-hearted, deepest-thoughted and most delicately profound in life of all the peoples of the earth, is the task next in importance and urgency.

Sri Aurobindo was to write later, in *A System of National Education*, that to make the most of the age of regeneration Indians should strive to be "children of the past, possessors of the present, creators of the future"; the essential enduring past was to be their foundation, the present their material, the future their goal and summit. No blind revivalism, this; nor an uncritical acceptance or rejection of everything new-fangled, everything imported and alien. The mould of the old social organisation and mental formation was broken already, giving Indians of the new age a priceless opportunity to remould "in larger outlines and with a richer content":

Our half-aristocratic, half-theocratic feudalism had to be broken in order that the democratic spirit of the Vedanta might be released, and by absorbing all that is needed of the aristocratic and theocratic culture, create for the Indian race a new and powerful political and social organisation. We have to learn and use the democratic principle and methods of Europe in order that hereafter we may build up something more suited to our past and to the future of humanity. We have to throw away individualism and materialism and keep the democracy.

Liberty, equality, fraternity — the godheads of the soul — had to be harmonised and practised in everyday life by an acceptance of the supreme spiritual truth of the One of ultimate Reality manifesting in the phenomenal world as the Many, as the play of multiplicity. Commerce, industrial and social organisation, the pursuit of the beautiful, the useful and the holy as three inter-linked objectives, economic growth, political maturity and strength, should all be integrated into a massive movement, leading to a moral and spiritual upliftment of India and the world. And the leader of such a movement must needs be a veritable Avatar of this Iron Age of Kali:

...he will not only be the religious guide, but the political leader, the great educationist, the regenerator of society, the captain of cooperative industry, with the soul of the poet, scholar and artist. He will be in short the summary and grand type of the future Indian nation which is rising to re-shape and lead the world.²

² The *Karmayogin*, 25 September 1909.

II

The "Open Letter" of 31 July had said "Check!" to the baffled bureaucracy, while it had also rallied the drooping forces of the Nationalists on the cardinal issues before them as enunciated in the six-point programme. This gave some respite, almost a lull; and Sri Aurobindo wrote and spoke in the coming weeks and months with the assurance and urgency of the man who knew and could say like Hamlet: "It will be short; the interim is mine!" The Kumartuli speech, the launching of the *Dharma*, the Hooghly Conference, the Sylhet Conference were pointers to the new directions of Sri Aurobindo's thought. Frail, intent and indomitable, Sri Aurobindo was seen scouring the confused ocean of public life with a freedom and resilience and determination all his own. He was thinker, poet, teacher, artist in life, revolutionary leader, tactician and practical politician, Apostle of the Future and Man of God all rolled into one — as if the great Power that rules the world was trying to cast Sri Aurobindo himself into the mould of leader of India and the world, the Avatar of the coming age. The *Karmayogin* was still Sri Aurobindo's principal medium for the expression of his views and for the projection of his prophetic Vision of the Future. But the political situation continued to be misty if not murky: repression stalked abroad very much as before, only abnormality had now acquired the respectability of a new hideous normalcy: and the eyes of the Moderates were fixed on the sweet fruit dangled before them as the Minto-Morley Reforms, with the scattered Nationalists standing aloof re-enacting the Vedic parable:

Two birds beautiful of wing, friends and com-

rades, cling to a common tree, and one eats the sweet fruit, the other regards him and eats not.³

Sri Aurobindo's attitude of sustained opposition to the Reforms so long as they were mere cumbrous tinsel containing not a milligramme of gold, caused great uneasiness to the Government, and once again there were set afloat rumours of his impending arrest. With the man there free to talk and write as he liked, the Reforms would have no chance at all of achieving their intended aim of hoodwinking the people. As for Sri Aurobindo, he too felt that the times were such that he should speak out. It was in this context that his second letter "To My Countrymen" appeared in the *Karmayogin* of 25 December 1909.

Sri Aurobindo began his second open letter with the remark that two decisive events had happened that called for some re-thinking and plain-speaking. In the first place, the phoney reforms had been published on 15 November 1909, and from the composition of the Councils it was clear that there was only the pretence of representation at the centre, while the reality of Swaraj was far, far beyond even the circumference. And secondly, the move for a united Congress, initiated by Sri Aurobindo at the Hooghly Conference, hadn't succeeded, and there was no doubt that the proposed Moderate Convention was foredoomed to failure, and was likely to "perish of inanition, and popular indifference, dislike and opposition". Under these altered circumstances, what were the Nationalists to do? If they stood back any longer, Nationalism might disappear as a force in Indian politics, and its place might be taken by "a sinister violent activity". Awakened India was unlikely to tolerate the

³ *Rig Veda*, I, 164.20 (Sri Aurobindo's translation).

induced coma of Moderatism. The national will, if it could not find self-expression through healthy and virile Nationalism employing the technique of Passive Resistance to the evil of alien rule, must unavoidably find an outlet through violent and terrorist resistance. As he explained the distinction in the article 'The Emergence of Terrorism':

The Nationalism we advocate is a thing difficult to grasp and follow, needing continual inspiration and encouragement to combat the impatience natural to humanity; its methods are comparatively new in politics and can only justify themselves to human conservatism by distinguished and sustained success. The preaching of the new revolutionary party is familiar to human imagination, supported by the records of some of the most inspiring episodes in history, in consonance with the impatience, violence and passion for concrete results which revolutionary epochs generate.

If India was to avoid alike Moderatist coma and terrorist violence, Nationalism must become a living force once again, as in the great days following the "partition" of Bengal. There was every need, then, to bring fresh vigour and commitment and dedication to the tasks of national education, arbitration, swadeshi-boycott, economic self-sufficiency, industrial independence and social dynamism:

These are the objects for which we have to organise the national strength of India. On us falls the burden, in us alone there is the moral ardour, faith and readiness for sacrifice which can attempt and go far to accomplish the task. But the first requisite is the organisation of the Nationalist party.

Organise the national strength: have faith, be ready for sacrifice, go forth and conquer! Not surprisingly, the bureaucracy saw in these implied exhortations the distinct beginnings of a new Nationalist offensive against the ramparts of alien despotism in India.

Indeed, the second letter was rather more forthright than the first, for the circumstances were different. There could be no mistaking the sense of urgency or the tone of stridency. The period of waiting was over; the Moderates had to be written off as useless (if not as a hindrance) to the national struggle; the Nationalists had to rely on God and on their own strength:

Whatever we do, we must do ourselves, in our own strength and courage. Let us then take up the work God has given us, like courageous, steadfast and patriotic men willing to sacrifice greatly and venture greatly, because the mission also is great. If there are any unnerved by the fear of repression, let them stand aside. If there are any who think that by flattering Anglo-India or coquetting with English Liberalism they can dispense with the need of effort and the inevitability of peril, let them stand aside....

The fear of law is for those who break the law.... We shall not break the law and, therefore, we need not fear the law. But if a corrupt police, unscrupulous officials or a partial judiciary makes use of the honourable publicity of our political methods to harrass the men who stand in front by illegal ukases, suborned and perjured evidence or unjust decisions, shall we shrink from the toll that we have to pay on our march to freedom? Shall we cower behind a petty secrecy or a dishonour-

able inactivity? We must have our associations, our organisations, our means of propaganda, and if these are suppressed by arbitrary proclamations, we shall have done our duty by our motherland, and not on us will rest any responsibility for the madness which crushes down open and lawful political activity in order to give a desperate and sullen nation into the hands of those fiercely enthusiastic and unscrupulous forces that have arisen among us inside and outside India....

The burden of the argument is simplicity itself. The Reforms were a mockery and a trap. The Moderates had eagerly swallowed the bait, and had to be left to stew in their own juice. But that couldn't affect the sullenness and despair of the people. The simmering discontent and resentment must break out, sooner or later, in forms of terrorist activity — unless the Nationalists were able to provide an alternative in the shape of open passive resistance within the four corners of the law. But there might be no need even for this, if only the Government would in time see the wisdom of scrapping the phoney reforms and ushering in something much closer to the expectations of the people:

We demand, therefore, not the monstrous and misbegotten scheme which has just been brought into being, but a measure of reform based upon those democratic principles which are ignored in Lord Morley's Reforms, — a literate electorate without distinction of creed, nationality or caste, freedom of election unhampered by exclusory clauses, an effective voice in legislation and finance, and some check upon an arbitrary executive. We demand also the gradual devolution of executive go-

vernment out of the hands of the bureaucracy into those of the people. Until these demands are granted, we shall use the pressure of that refusal of co-operation which is termed passive resistance.

Actually, from the extreme Nationalist point of view, this could be read as a concession, for all it asked for was a kind of "dyarchy" with a measure of genuine self-control, and with an inbuilt dynamism moving towards complete independence. Behind the guarded language, Sri Aurobindo had made his second open letter both an ultimatum to the Government and a mobilisation order to the Nationalist party.¹

III

It was perhaps expected that, as after the publication of the first letter in July, the second letter of December too would by its very frankness make the Government stay their hand, even if they had earlier had the idea of arresting and deporting Sri Aurobindo. There it was, the Nationalist position, stated without reservations or ambiguity. The demand for Swaraj meant no hostility to the British people, no race hatred, but merely issued from the conviction that, without autonomy or a substantial measure of it immediately, the nation would not be able to develop on right lines and realise its destiny. Moderatism was one kind of escapism, the tamasic; and terrorism was another kind (the rajasic, a matter of spendthrift energy, a wasteful affair). On the other hand, Nationalism as Sri Aurobindo conceived it in terms of passive resistance was honest — was practical

¹ Cf. "Sri Aurobindo would have accepted Dyarchy as a step, if it had given genuine control" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 90 fn.).

— and meant business. The Nationalist cards were all laid on the table, and the bureaucracy and their principals in England should have welcomed alike Sri Aurobindo's courage and clarity and honesty and consciousness of crisis and sense of responsibility.

On the publication of the letter, the authorities seem to have taken serious counsel and for a few days nothing happened. From the beginning of the new year, the *Karmayogin* was even able to bring out a cheaper edition at one anna a copy with no risk of financial loss. But soon the rumblings of rumour-mongering started again, and the source of some of the persistent rumours was traced to "those pillars of authority, the police". It was to be a massive operation apparently, involving a dozen or two Nationalists, who were to be deported during the next few days. As the *Karmayogin* wrote in its issue dated 8 January under the caption "The Menace of Deportation":

...so successfully the noise of the coming *Coup d'Etat* has been circulated that the rumours of it come to us from a distant corner of Bihar. It appears that the name of S. J. Aurobindo Ghose crowns the police list of those who are to be spirited away to the bureaucratic Bastilles.... The Government ought to make up its mind one way or the other, and the country should know whether they will or will not tolerate opposition within the law; and this will decide it. Meanwhile, why does the thunderbolt linger? Or is there again a hitch in London?

With a Liberal, Lord Morley, at the India Office and a diehard, Lord Minto, as the Viceroy, there was always room for difference of opinion, at least on questions of

detail. And even in India, the Government of Bengal and the Central Government didn't always see eye to eye as regards the pace of repression or the intended victims. It was often a question of timing or the permissible limits of risk, but of course reason and logic and cold calculation could any moment be given a violent jolt by the spurt of the unexpected. The sudden eruption of the irrational can usually throw into confusion the carefulest contrivings and calculations.

On 24 January 1910, when Sri Aurobindo was at the *Karmayogin* Office as was his custom in the evenings, news was brought by a young man, Satish Sarkar, that Shams-ul-Alam the Deputy Superintendent of the Intelligence Department had just been shot down on the steps of the High Court, publicly and under the eyes of many, by a lad of twenty, Birendranath Dattagupta. Satish had been with Biren but had managed to come away; it was doubtful if Biren could have escaped. Shams-ul-Alam had more than distinguished himself during the Alipur proceedings and in other political cases by his excessive zeal to get the accused convicted, and the revolutionaries had had their eye on him for some time, and on their behalf Biren had now — as he thought — settled old scores; he was himself to be soon arrested, convicted and hanged. Like the bomb-outrage on the Pringle-Kennedy ladies in April 1908, the killing of Shams-ul-Alam also suddenly queered the political pitch in Bengal, and different interests began reacting in predictable ways. On 29 January the *Karmayogin*, commenting on this "startling assassination" which had broken "the silence which had settled on the country" deplored the event and added with a touch of resignation:

All we can do is to sit with folded hands and listen to the senseless oburgations of the Anglo-Indian press, waiting for a time when the peaceful expression and organisation of our national aspirations will no longer be penalised. It is then that Terrorism will vanish from the country and the nightmare be as if it never had been.

The previous issue (22 January) had carried the news that an anonymous letter had conveyed the information that "a certain Gopal Chandra Ray of the C.I.D., with several assistants, was busy watching 6, College Square (Sri Aurobindo's place of residence), and the Post Office, and copying all the letters and postcards that came in his name without exception". The public killing of Shams-ul-Alam not unnaturally threw the authorities into a panic, the Anglo-Indian papers became hysterical, the leaders merely condemned terrorism without caring or daring to look at the poison-tree that bore such bitter fruit, and the only result was that normal legal Nationalist political activity became almost impossible. Sri Aurobindo who had been thinking in the open letter of 25 December of a reorganisation of Nationalist activity in terms of clarity, orderliness, careful deliberation and disciplined and well-planned political action, was now compelled to revise his views and as good as order a halt:

A triangular contest between violent revolution, peaceful Nationalist endeavour and bureaucratic reaction is an impossible position, and would make chaos more chaotic.... The Government demands cooperation from the Moderates, silence from the Nationalists. Let us satisfy them.... Revolution paralyses our effort to deal peacefully but effectively

with repression. Repression refuses to allow us to cut the ground from under the feet of Revolution. Both demand a clear field for their conflict. Let us therefore stand aside, sure that Time will work for us... our hour may be delayed, but not denied to us for ever.

From the Government's point of view, the situation clearly called for drastic action. There was Sri Aurobindo, in their eyes Public Enemy Number One, still at large and free to do as he liked; and there was now this shocking murder of Shams-ul-Alam under the very nose of the Government as it were! Of course, there would be no use trying to connect Sri Aurobindo with the murder. That sort of smart linking-up had ignominiously failed in the Alipur case, and would fail again if attempted. Sri Aurobindo was not the sort of man to get directly implicated in such acts of terrorism, much less to leave clues behind him. Why not — more pro-saically, perhaps, but more safely — prosecute him for sedition on account of the signed letter in the *Karmayogin* of 25 December? The law officers of the Government thought that the letter *was* seditious, and it was decided therefore to issue a warrant for the arrest of Sri Aurobindo under Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code. One night in February — probably on the 14th — when Sri Aurobindo was sitting with his assistants in the *Karmayogin* office at 4 Shyampukur Lane, young Ramachandra Majumdar brought the news that he had heard from his father, a high police official, that the arrest of Sri Aurobindo and a search of the office were imminent, and the police might come that very night.⁵

⁵ See Uma Mukherjee, 'How Sri Aurobindo withdrew to Pondicherry', reprinted in *Mother India*, August 1969, pp. 487ff. Mrs. Mukherjee

While the young men discussed animatedly what was the best thing to do under the circumstances and whether they should not make an attempt to resist the police when they came, Sri Aurobindo who was sitting in silence listening to their talk received a clear *ādes*, or inner direction: "No, go to Chandernagore".

Ever since his first Nirvanic realisation with Yogi Lele in Baroda two years earlier, Sri Aurobindo had heard the Voice on crucial occasions, and had learned to obey it implicitly. This was beyond cold reason or calculation; this was a Divine Command. So he got up and said quietly, "Come, let us move out just now!" Surprisingly enough, there were no C.I.D. men outside the *Karmayogin* office that night, though that was almost the routine till then. He sent one of the young men to Sister Nivedita, requesting her in a note to take up the editorship of the *Karmayogin* in his absence. Preceded by Ramachandra, and followed at some discreet distance by Biren Ghose and Suresh Chakravarti (Moni), he walked to the river-side and reached the Ganga Ghat in about ten minutes' time. A boat was immediately engaged, and Sri Aurobindo boarded it, and it made for Chandernagore; Biren and Suresh were with him, while Ramachandra returned. The journey by boat took the greater part of the night, and once or twice the two boatmen, when they came to shallow waters, had to drag rather than row the boat. Anchoring at last at the Strand at Chandernagore when it was still dark, Biren sought Charuchandra Roy (who had been arrested in the Ali-pur case but later released) and asked him to make arrangements for Sri Aurobindo's stay. Finding him

arrives at the date 14th February on the basis of Motilal Roy's letter to Nagendra Kumar Guha Roy (p. 489).

hesitant, Biren turned to one Sisir Ghose who took them to Motilal Roy, a prominent citizen. On coming to know who had come, Motilal went to welcome Sri Aurobindo and took him home, and promised to make all necessary arrangements for his stay and also to keep his arrival secret. The young men started for Calcutta in the morning so as not to give room for suspicion.⁶

At first, Motilal arranged for Sri Aurobindo's stay in the drawing room; he was then shifted to a more secluded place in the first floor of the house. Thus, with a single firm gesture of withdrawal, Sri Aurobindo had succeeded in shaking off the dust of Calcutta and politics, and finding a temporary haven — an Inn of Tranquillity — in Motilal Roy's house in Chandernagore, a piece of French territory at the time and hence reasonably insulated from the attentions of the British police.

IV

The sudden disappearance of Sri Aurobindo — his actual whereabouts remained a carefully guarded secret with five or six of his closest associates — gave rise to much wild speculation, and came as a setback to the moves set afoot by the Government. A search of the *Karmayogin* office yielded no results, and the officers of the Government felt checkmated, and found it difficult to justify their actions to Lord Morley at the India Office. "Although

⁶ See Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 40-1, and *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 99ff., 118ff. The story that Sri Aurobindo visited Baghazar Math on his way to Chandernagore to receive initiation from Saradamani Devi has been dismissed as a wholly unfounded fabrication (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 100).

he escaped conviction in the Alipur case", the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Minto: "yet it is beyond doubt that his influence has been pernicious in the extreme". He added that with his "semi-religious fanaticism" Sri Aurobindo had spread seditious doctrines with greater success than almost anyone else. Minto himself later wrote to Morley, throwing off all masks whether of diplomacy or propriety:

As to the celebrated Arabinda, I confess I cannot in the least understand your hope that we shall not get a conviction against him!... he is the most dangerous man we now have to reckon with, he was one of the instigators in the Manicktolla murders and has an unfortunate influence on the student class, and Indians who know him well have told me he is quite beyond redemption. Surely you cannot hope that such a man should remain at large.

Morley had found, after a perusal of the *Karmayogin* articles (including the open letter of 25 December 1909), that they were hardly likely to sustain a prosecution for sedition;⁷ and future events were to justify him rather than the Viceroy or the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal.

Still the question of questions remained: Where had Sri Aurobindo gone? The press, the public and of course the Government, all participated in the hectic game of

⁷ Edward Baker, Lt.-Governor of Bengal, wrote to Minto on 19 April 1910; Morley wrote to Minto on 5 May, stating that the articles in question were unlikely to lead to a conviction; and Minto, feeling both piqued and pricked, wrote back to Morley on 26 May in scarcely concealed bad humour. On 15 July, Morley wrote to Minto that they had information in London that Sri Aurobindo had become a "converted sinner" who had retired from the business of political agitation. (Quoted from the Minto and Morley Papers in M.N. Das's *India Under Morley and Minto*, p. 145.)

speculation. The exasperated police sought him here — sought him there — and drew blank everywhere. The *Karmayogin*, which was now edited by Sister Nivedita, published in its issue of 26 March 1910:

We are greatly astonished to learn from the local press that S^j. Aurobindo Ghose has disappeared from Calcutta and is now interviewing the Mahatmas in Tibet. We are ourselves unaware of this mysterious disappearance. As a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo is in our midst and, if he is doing any astral business with Kuthumi or any other of the great Rishis, the fact is unknown to his other *koṣas* (sheaths). Only, as he requires perfect solitude and freedom from disturbance for his sadhana for some time, his address is being kept a strict secret.

The *Dharma* also announced on 21 March that, as he was engaged in the practice of Yoga, he would not be taking up any political or journalistic work, and his place of *sādhana* too was being kept a secret.

Balked in their first attempts to locate Sri Aurobindo's place of retreat, the police made certain oblique moves. Letters went to Sri Aurobindo's Calcutta address (his residence in College Square or his office in Shyampukur) challenging him, or insinuatingly inviting him, to come out into the open; and it was hoped that these letters would force him to come out of his retreat, so that he could be immediately put under arrest. But Sri Aurobindo saw through the game and refused to walk into the trap. The warrant of arrest was suspended for a while, but the bureaucracy, having presumably learned the wrong end of the lesson of the *Bande Mataram* case of 1907, decided to prosecute Manmohan Ghose, the printer of the *Karmayogin*, for the publication of the seditious article

(the open letter of 25 December) contributed to the paper by Sri Aurobindo. The author himself having made a flight to escape arrest, the printer had to stand the charge!

At the Court of the Chief Presidency Magistrate at Calcutta, the printer was found guilty and sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment. But the printer duly preferred an appeal to the High Court, and there on 7 November 1910, Justice Holmwood and Justice Fletcher, in separate but concurring judgements, held that the article in question was *not* seditious, and accordingly set aside the conviction and ordered his release from jail. Justice Fletcher said, in the course of his learned judgement:

I have come to the conclusion that it does not appear from the article that it is such as is likely to cause disaffection or produce hatred and contempt of the Government, nor can I find from the article that such was the intention of the writer. Doubtless to many, if not to most people, the writer's view of the great reform scheme would appear to be unreasonable and one that does not recognise the great advance that has been made; but with that we are not concerned. All that we have to decide is whether the law has or has not been broken by the publication of this article, and I have come to the conclusion that it has not.

Alas, this was worse even than the *Bande Mataram* debacle! "There is nothing to be done", the Secretary of State was informed telegraphically; "the able judgement of Justice Fletcher... will enable a writer with a facile pen (such as Aravinda Ghose) to publish sedition with impunity...." A rueful conclusion, indeed! On the other

hand, Lord Hardinge the new Viceroy was able to draw the right lessons from the failure of the prosecution. Writing on 11 January 1911 to the Secretary of State (Lord Crewe), Hardinge said that prosecutions for sedition should be taken up only if conviction was practically assured: especially in a case against Sri Aurobindo the risk of failure should have been examined "with more than usual care and avoided": and the prosecution against him seemed to have been "taken up in a more venturesome spirit than the gravity of the step warranted". On his part, Lord Crewe wrote to Hardinge on 13 January that "the ill-luck of this prosecution" was that Sri Aurobindo, dangerous though he might be, "was well-known here (England), and looked on as a high-souled enthusiast, averse to crime, and thus a man who ought not to have been attacked without the clearest proof". (In fact, late in April 1910, the issue had been raised in the House of Commons by Ramsay MacDonald, who had met Sri Aurobindo earlier and formed a high opinion of the spiritual orientation of his life.) Lord Crewe concluded with the doleful remark that, as a result of the prosecution, "all the material has been supplied for turning him (Sri Aurobindo) into a hero". There was nothing to do except grin and bear it!⁸

There was a mini-anticlimax too. Days passed and the poor printer wasn't released from prison. An application was made before Dr. Thornhill, the Chief Presidency Magistrate, on 18 November, and the Magistrate asked with some incredulity: "What? Do you really mean to tell me that the man is not yet released?" Then he ordered the Superintendent of the Presidency Jail to take

⁸ Vide Prithwindra Mukherjee's note on the Hardinge Papers, published as a letter in *Mother India* (September 1971), pp. 533-4.

immediate action and sent the order by a special messenger. As regards the two papers, the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma*, although they bravely carried on for some months after Sri Aurobindo's departure from Calcutta, they had to be closed down after all. The police were after the young men associated with the journals, and they decided accordingly to disperse and make themselves scarce. Of the three permanent residents at the Shyampukur office, Suresh took refuge in the Tagore family, Bejoy disappeared in Calcutta, and Nolini found a temporary asylum in the house of a friend in a remote village.⁹

V

Sri Aurobindo stayed in Chandernagore for a month and a half, from about 15 February to 31 March 1910. The problem for Motilal Roy was to look after his unique guest with reverent care, and at the same time to keep his presence in Chandernagore a closed secret. Having first conveyed Sri Aurobindo from the drawing room to the uninhabited first floor of his house, Motilal went out to get some food for his guest, and when he returned, he found that Sri Aurobindo was in deep meditation. When the food was placed before him, he ate it as if he was hardly conscious of what he was doing. The same night, Sri Aurobindo was moved to another house for rest. Next day, however, he returned to Motilal's house, as the other house was not perhaps to Sri Aurobindo's liking. On the third night, Sri Aurobindo was taken to Gondalpara in the northern part of the

⁹ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 40-1.

town, and lodged in the house of Balai Chandra De. That was an obscure enough place and hence a safe retreat for Sri Aurobindo, and he was now able to devote himself wholly to his sadhana.

It is likely that during July-December 1909, the period between the two "open letters", Sri Aurobindo had more than once considered the possibility of a temporary withdrawal from active politics so as to be able to make a more effective intervention feasible at a later and more favourable time. The spiritual and political pulls had been with him all along, from the time of the composition of *Bhavani Mandir* at least; but whereas, during the editorship of the *Bande Mataram*, the political pull was rather stronger than the spiritual, during the editorship of the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma*, the spiritual pull was decidedly stronger, and this was confessedly the result of his prison-sadhana at Alipur. Although during the short spell of his political leadership he proved a superb strategist and technician of political action, although his speeches and writings bore the impress of a masterful and wide-ranging intellect, yet he had learned, as a result of his spiritual experiences, to subordinate everything to the Divine Command whenever it might come. Thus it was that in mid-February, whatever his contingency plans before, when the *ādes* actually came, "No, go to Chandernagore!" — it was the countermanding of a mental plan and the issue of a Divine Command — he followed it implicitly. And in Motilal Roy's upstairs room, Sri Aurobindo must have felt a sudden cleansing of the dust and odour of politics, for he was found sitting in meditation as one on the threshold of a new life. He sent no further contributions to the *Karmayogin* or the *Dharma*, and reduced

his contacts with the world to an absolute minimum. As the days passed, he saw that his real destiny was to make spiritual, rather than political, conquests. In a manner of speaking, the political period was now ended; the Yogic period had begun.

Motilal Roy himself was now attracted to Yoga, and Sri Aurobindo gave him the necessary guidance: "Surrender everything to God!" was the key instruction, and this was ultimately to lead to the establishment of the Pravarthak Sangha which Motilal managed, first in affiliation to Sri Aurobindo, and after 1920 independently on his own. Apart from Motilal, Sri Aurobindo hardly saw anybody else while in Chandernagore. It was a period of sustained sadhana for him, and since he is said to have seen "subtle forms and spiritual visions" — including certain goddesses whom he later recognised as the Vedic Ila, Bharati, Mahi and Saraswati — his sadhana must have taken him to the occult worlds above and below and the inner countries of the mind, heart and soul. Motilal Roy has recorded that he found Sri Aurobindo "a completely surrendered individual — one felt when he spoke as if somebody else was speaking through him.... He appeared to be absorbed even when he was eating; he used to meditate with open eyes, and see subtle forms and spiritual visions".¹⁰ One of the ablest commentators on Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, Satprem, builds a fascinating edifice of speculation on Motilal's testimony and other casual hints. Chandernagore was doubtless the hyphen connecting the political period in India and the Yoga period in Pondicherry. From Chandernagore Sri Aurobindo could have returned to Calcutta; he preferred rather to proceed to Pondicherry.

¹⁰ Purani, *Life*, p. 155.

Superficially, of course, Sri Aurobindo left for Pondicherry because Chandernagore was too inconveniently and dangerously near Calcutta, the storm-centre of the Indian political world of those days; at distant Pondicherry, he would not be as easily accessible to the police spies of the Bengal Government. But was there not a deeper reason as well? That could have been provided only by the course of his sadhana in Chandernagore. What, then, was the particular Yogic realisation there?

At Baroda in January 1908, the Nirvanic or Sunya realisation; at Alipur in May-June 1909 and after, the realisation of the omnipresent Divine, of Vasudeva who is everywhere and in everybody and in everything, *Vāsudevaḥ sarvamiti*; what was the new *siddhi* at Chandernagore? Mainly on the basis of Motilal Roy's words quoted above, Satprem writes:

That day of 1910 at Chandernagore, Sri Aurobindo reached the bottom of the hole, he had crossed all the layers of dirt on which Life had sprung up, inexplicable flower; there was now only this Light above shining more and more intensely as he descended, throwing up all the impurities one by one under its keen ray as though all this Night called ever a greater Light, as though the line of the subconscious was withdrawing, withdrawing towards the depth in an ever more solid concentration in the inverse image of the concentration above, leaving this single wall of Shadow under this one Light; when, at one bound, without transition, at the bottom of this "inconscious" Matter and in the dark cells of this body, without falling into ecstatic trance, without the loss of the indivi-

dual, without cosmic dissolution, and with eyes wide open, Sri Aurobindo found himself precipitated into the supreme Light.¹¹

When Satprem says that "Sri Aurobindo found the Secret at Chandernagore in 1910 and worked on it for forty years; he gave up his life for this"¹², he is right in the sense that Chandernagore certainly led to Pondicherry — that Chandernagore was both the end of the first phase of Sri Aurobindo's mission and the beginning of the second phase — but, on the other hand, reading so much as Satprem has done in Motilal Roy's simple words ("one felt when he spoke as if somebody else was speaking through him... he used to meditate with open eyes") doesn't quite carry conviction. But, then, we are here in the realm of imponderables, at the meeting-place of the infinitudes, where hyperbolic-asymptotic-like the extremest opposites are found to be next-door neighbours, where the dark is light enough, where defeat is the truer victory, and death is verily life everlasting.

When all attempts have been made to unravel the mystery, the brief Chandernagore interlude remains a bit of an enigma. We have, of course, Sri Aurobindo's own word that "at Chandernagore he plunged entirely into solitary meditation and ceased all other activity".¹³ Hardly ten months after his release from the Alipur jail, here was Sri Aurobindo going into a prison of his own forging —

Upon Truth's solid rock there stands

¹¹ *Sri Aurobindo or The Adventure of Consciousness*, translated from the French by Tehmi (1968), pp. 268-9.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 247.

¹³ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 66.

A thin walled ivory tower.¹⁴

The first development, something compulsive and instantaneous almost, was the complete surrender to the Divine, a total identification with the supreme creatrix, a continuation and intensification of the experience in the Alipur jail where he had felt the Mother's arms around him, where he had securely rested on the Mother's lap.¹⁵ Very likely what now happened was not unlike Aswapathy's early realisations when he had resolutely withdrawn from the pressures and pains of the world, — withdrawn from outer sovereignty so as to be able to explore the divers occult conditions and wrest the ultimate secret:

The intense creatrix in his stillness wrought;
Her power fallen speechless grew more intimate;
She looked upon the seen and the unforeseen,
Ungessed domains she made her native field.
All vision gathered into a single ray,
As when the eyes stare at any invisible point
Till through the intensity of one luminous spot
An apocalypse of a world of images
Enters into the kingdom of the seer.
A great nude arm of splendour suddenly rose;
It rent the gauze opaque of Nescience...
A traveller between summit and abyss
She joined the distant ends....¹⁶

Sri Aurobindo had come to Chandernagore because of the inner direction, "No, go to Chandernagore!" At Chandernagore too there were plans on his behalf. Friends thought of sending him away to France. Sri

¹⁴ S. R. Dongerkery, 'The Ivory Tower'.

¹⁵ *Bulletin*, XXI, 2 (April 1969), p. 102.

¹⁶ *Savitri* (1954 edition), pp. 44-5.

Aurobindo himself wondered what he should do next: "Then I got the *ādes* — command — to go to Pondicherry."¹⁷ The decision had once again been taken out of his hands. In retrospect, the whole Chandernagore interlude, hedged in as it was by two divine commands, filled all the while by the ambience of the Mother, sustained by constant Visions of four of Her powers and personalities, would seem to have been for Sri Aurobindo, not merely an Inn of Tranquillity for his physical being, but also a momentous tunnelling for the soul through the hard rocks of consciousness to emerge on a plateau of possibility at the other end with its own Cave of Tapasya.

¹⁷ Purani, *Life*, p. 155

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PONDICHERRY: CAVE OF TAPASYA

I

Having decided to leave Chandernagore for Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo first spoke to Motilal Roy about it. The idea was that Sri Aurobindo, accompanied by Bejoy Nag, should board the steamer *Dupleix* on the night of 31 March 1910. Motilal wrote to Sukumar Mitra (Krishna Kumar Mitra's son, and Sri Aurobindo's cousin) and Amar Chatterji of Uttarpara asking them to make the necessary arrangements. Everything had to be done in secret, for there was an oppressive air of suspicion everywhere, and police spies were posted at even the unlikeliest places. Sukumar Mitra therefore decided to work through safe intermediaries. He gave two trunks (filled with clothes and other items of personal use) to one Nagendra Kumar Guha Roy for temporary custody, and also asked him to buy two second class tickets and reserve a double cabin for Colombo by SS. *Dupleix*: it was hoped that "Colombo" instead of "Pondicherry" would throw the police off the scent when the inevitable chase began. Nagen and Surendra Kumar Chakravarty were instructed to convey the trunks to the steamer and put them in the reserved cabin well in time. Also, it was arranged that Amar Chatterji and Manmatha Biswas should hire a boat at Uttarpara on the appointed date and meet Sri Aurobindo at the Dharamtala ghat and bring him to the Calcutta side of the river, where they would be met by the others and taken to the steamer.

Unfortunately, there was a hitch in the arrangements.

Nagen and Surendra who were to meet Sri Aurobindo missed the boat in which he came with Amar and Manmatha. The latter, not finding anybody to receive them, went to Sukumar's house in College Square; not finding him, they quickly returned to the riverside and waited there. On learning that Nagen and Surendra had failed to contact Sri Aurobindo, Sukumar directed that the trunks should be brought back from the ship to his house. When Nagen came with the trunks, Sukumar asked him to take them back to riverside, as he had learned that Sri Aurobindo was waiting there in a carriage. This time there was no mistake, but the problem was for Sri Aurobindo and Bejoy Nag to get their medical certificates. It being late, the doctor had left the port and returned to his house. Accordingly they went to his residence in Chowringhee at about 9.30 p.m., and after a brief examination received the certificates in the names they had assumed — Jyotindra Mitter and Bankimchandra Bhowmik — and the European doctor seems to have remarked that one of them spoke remarkably chaste English. So, after all, Sri Aurobindo and Bejoy Nag were able to board the ship that night.

During all this comedy of missed meetings (which could have turned into a disaster had the police been more vigilant), Sri Aurobindo seems to have maintained a marvellous calm, as if he couldn't care less — or as if he knew for a certainty that all would be well. Besides, had things gone according to the original plan, a Calcutta police officer would have been present at the time of the medical inspection, and he might have suspected something. Thanks to the comedy of errors, however, the late passengers were examined at the doctor's residence, there was no police officer in attendance, and

the doctor issued the certificates without any ado. A divinity shapes our ends, indeed, rough hew them how we will!

Once in their cabin, Amar gave Sri Aurobindo the money that had been sent by Rajendra Mukherji, Zemindar of Uttarpara. Amar and Nagen respectfully took leave of Sri Aurobindo and Bejoy, and the steamer sailed out of Calcutta well past midnight.

In the meantime, Suresh Chakravarti (Moni) — who had been asked by Sri Aurobindo to proceed to Pondicherry in advance and make some arrangements for his stay — had left Calcutta by train on 28 March. He had disguised himself as an Anglo-Indian, and was seen off by Sukumar Mitra and Saurin Bose (Mrinalini's cousin). He carried with him a letter of introduction to Mandayam Srinivasachariar, a sterling Nationalist, who was bringing out *India*, *Vijaya*, *Karmayogi* and *Bala Bharata* with the help of his brother Tirumalachariar and other Nationalists like Subramania Bharati. Since Bharati's flight from Madras to Pondicherry, that obscure French town had begun to attract political exiles from India, and he had been followed by Srinivasachariar, Subramania Siva, and others. It was therefore thought that Srinivasachariar and his friends would be able to make suitable arrangements for Sri Aurobindo's stay at Pondicherry.

On arriving there on 31 March 1910, Moni duly met Srinivasachariar with the letter. At first Srinivasachariar and his friends were incredulous that Sri Aurobindo — no less a person than Sri Aurobindo — might be seeking asylum in unimportant inaccessible Pondicherry of all places. And a doubt crossed his mind too: suppose Moni himself were a spy employed by the Calcutta po-

lice! The authorities at Madras had made it impossible for Srinivasachariar to continue the publication of *India*, and he was himself experiencing no end of difficulties. Moni might be a decoy — a trap! On the other hand, should Moni be genuine and his letter authentic, was it not the duty of Srinivasachariar and his friends to organise a fitting reception for the great leader? Moni, however, won their confidence and also persuaded them that, since Sri Aurobindo was coming incognito, they should not give any publicity to his arrival or presence in Pondicherry. Accordingly, Srinivasachariar and Moni received Sri Aurobindo and Bejoy on 4 April in the afternoon at the Pondicherry port and took him to the house of a prominent citizen, Calve Shankara Chettiar.

II

At the Calcutta end, the mysterious disappearance of Sri Aurobindo and the continued mystery regarding his whereabouts and intentions were a constant irritant to the bureaucracy. The institution of proceedings against the printer of the *Karmayogin* was poor consolation at best; having let the big whale escape, of what use was the attempt to net the smaller fry? The Government, however, must have got wind of the departure of the two late passengers on board SS. *Dupleix* on the night of 31 March. The C.I.D. seem to have readily fallen into the trap laid for them, and they immediately took steps to restrain Sri Aurobindo from proceeding beyond Colombo — to France or elsewhere. After all, in case Sri Aurobindo wished to go to France, he would have to change steamers at Colombo, and might be obliged

to use a local boat for the purpose; *that* would be the time to execute the warrant. The authorities in Ceylon were accordingly requested to watch for Sri Aurobindo of Calcutta and Sardar Ajit Singh of Lahore, both “absconders charged with sedition”, and arrest them when they reached Colombo. The Government knew that *two* passengers had left on the 31st night; one of them was certainly Sri Aurobindo. Since Ajit Singh too was on the “wanted” list, might it not be that *he* was the second passenger?

From Madras, Papu Rao Naidu who had been nosing for information at that end, wired to Calcutta on 9 April that Sri Aurobindo had arrived at Pondicherry by SS. *Dupleix* on the morning of the 6th April and was received by Srinivasachariar and the *India* people. On 13 April, the irrepressible Papu Rao wired again that Sri Aurobindo and Ajit Singh were at Pondicherry, and somebody might be sent to identify the men. By 17 April, the dossier was fairly complete at Calcutta. The C.I.D. had managed to put together a good deal of relevant (and some mightily irrelevant) information. The names of the midnight late passengers — “J. N. Mitter of Uluberia” and “B. C. Bhowmik of Nilphamari” — provoked inquiries that led nowhere. Although poor Mitter was a real person, it was obvious he hadn’t gone on a sea voyage; and presently the doctor, on being shown Sri Aurobindo’s portrait, identified the face as that of the “J. N. Mitter” to whom he had given a health certificate. As for “B. C. Bhowmik”, who could it have been except Nolini Kanta Gupta, one of Sri Aurobindo’s closest associates? It was also possible, ran bureaucratic speculation, that Sri Aurobindo had originally intended to embark at Bombay for Germany, but had actually

left for Pondicherry instead, presumably because there had been some last-minute "difficulty about money". Then came the welcome news to Calcutta that Sri Aurobindo had been identified at Pondicherry by comparison with the "Simla photo".¹

Before leaving Chandernagore, Sri Aurobindo had answered one of the anonymous letters addressed to his Calcutta residence asking him to come out into the open by saying that, after all, there was no public warrant against him, and no prosecution had been announced either; and there was thus no reason why he should emerge from his retirement simply to please his correspondent! The police took the bait, issued a warrant against Sri Aurobindo, and started proceedings against the printer of the *Karmayogin* for publishing in the paper the second open letter in the issue of 25 December 1909. As we saw in the preceding chapter (XV. iv), the case went against the printer in the lower court, but on an appeal to the High Court, the conviction was set aside, the printer's release was ordered, and the impugned article was declared to be *not* seditious. On the same day (7 November 1910), but before he knew about the favourable judgement by Holmwood and Fletcher, JJ., Sri Aurobindo wrote to the *Hindu* of Madras from 42, Rue-de-Parillon, Pondicherry:

I shall be obliged if you will allow me to inform every one interested in my whereabouts through your journal that I am and will remain in Pondicherry. I left British India over a month before proceedings were taken against me and, as I had purposely retired here in order to pursue my Yogic sadhana

¹ From documents quoted in *Bulletin*, XXI, 1 (February 1969), pp. 108-12.

undisturbed by political action or pursuit and had already severed connection with my political work, I did not feel called upon to surrender on the warrant for sedition, as might have been incumbent on me if I had remained in the political field. I have since lived here as a religious recluse, visited only by a few friends, French and Indian, but my whereabouts have been an open secret, long known to the agents of the Government and widely rumoured in Madras as well as perfectly known to every one in Pondicherry. I find myself now compelled, somewhat against my will, to give my presence here a wider publicity. It has suited certain people for an ulterior object to construct a theory that I am not in Pondicherry, but in British India, and I wish to state emphatically that I have not been in British India since March last....

Sri Aurobindo had touched British India on the evening of 31 March when he came to Calcutta from Chander-nagore to board SS. *Dupleix*; since that night he had not been in British India, and he had no intention of setting foot on British territory "even for a single moment in the future unless I can return publicly".

While Sri Aurobindo was thus firm in his intention to eschew political activity and make Pondicherry the seat of his sadhana, his cave of tapasya, the British authorities were not inclined to accept his words at their face value. No, no, it just couldn't be true: religion, spirituality, Yoga were mere subterfuges: the man was really at a deep game of conspiracy against the established British power in India. He needed to be watched closely. Indeed, it was imperative that he should be seized somehow — anyhow — and brought to British India.

In the early weeks, Sri Aurobindo's two constant companions were Moni and Bejoy. In October, Saurin Bose joined them, and in November, Nolini. In answer to a letter from Manoranjan Guha Thakurta and Shyamsundar Chakravarti from Calcutta seeking guidance in politics, Sri Aurobindo wrote to them that he had severed all connection with politics, and that Bhagavan Sri Krishna had taken the responsibility for freeing India from alien rule. And yet the Government in India were obsessed with the idea that Sri Aurobindo and his group of four young friends were directing a diabolical conspiracy and perhaps even supplying pistols and other instruments of insurrection to the revolutionaries in India! It was therefore the considered view of the authorities in India that, by fair means or foul, Sri Aurobindo should be brought back to India.

In the first instance, kidnapping by the local "bandes" or professional *goondas* seems to have been thought of, but Moni, Bejoy and their friends were ever alert and patrolled all night to prevent a sudden assault. Next, a trumped-up charge against Sri Aurobindo and his young men was sought to be framed. In Nolini's words —

Some of the local "ghouls" were made to help forge the documents — some photographs and maps and charts along with a few letters — which were to prove that we had been engaged in a conspiracy for dacoity and murder. The papers were left in a well in the compound of one of our men, then they were "discovered" after a search by the police.²

At this time (1912), besides Sri Aurobindo and his associates from Bengal, there were also the revolutionaries from Tamil Nad — Bharati, Srinivasachariar, Subrama-

² *Reminiscences*, p. 44.

nia Siva, Nagaswami Aiyar and V. V. S. Aiyar (the last a close friend of the Maharashtrian revolutionary, Vinayak Damodhar Savarkar). The stooge in this matter was Mayuresan, a French Indian, and the "documents" were placed in a tin box and dropped into the well in V. V. S. Aiyar's house. Accidentally the maidservant caught up the tin box in her bucket while drawing water. Aiyar and Bharati took counsel together, and also consulted Sri Aurobindo who advised them to inform the police. On an examination, the box was found to contain some seditious pamphlets and journals, besides some writing in Bengali and an image of Kali. The investigating magistrate, M. Nandot, came to Sri Aurobindo's house with the Chief of Police. But all they found was literature in Latin and Greek. The appropriate exclamation was, "Il sait du latin, il sait du grec!" ("He knows Latin, he knows Greek!") And was it possible that a classical scholar could ever entertain mischief? The prosecutors became friends and admirers.³ The trouble henceforth was, not with the French, but with the British spies in Pondicherry and the British authorities in India. For the French, Sri Aurobindo was an honoured political exile, entitled to their protection. Evil usually recoils upon itself, and such was the predicament of some of the evil-doers. Both Nand Gopal who had offered to do the kidnapping and Mayuresan who had engineered the plot to implicate the political exiles in criminal acts had ultimately to flee Pondicherry and seek asylum in British India. Writing of these events to Motilal Roy on 3 July 1912, Sri Aurobindo made the following neat summing-up: "I think the fangs have been drawn".⁴

³ *ibid.*, p. 44; also Purani, *Life*, pp. 173-4. ⁴ Purani, *Life*, p. 176.

Force and fraud, both having been tried and both having failed to produce the desired results, temptation was tried as a last resort. Word came to Sri Aurobindo that the Government of India would be pleased to grant asylum to him at a secluded and salubrious hill-resort like Darjeeling to pursue his Yoga in complete freedom, and Lord Carmichael himself would like to discuss philosophy with him. What an honour! Yet Sri Aurobindo knew it to be but "an ointment to catch a fly". He declined to move out of Pondicherry. Later, the British persuaded the French Government to offer Sri Aurobindo a safe passage to Algeria in Africa, where he could live in peace with his chosen disciples and continue his own way of life. Some of the other political exiles were also wondering whether the French might not ultimately yield to British pressure and hand them over to them. Would it not be better to explore the possibility of moving out of India altogether and going to Jibuti, Tripoli or French Indo-China? And the Algerian offer, coming from the French, was too good to be rejected. And in case it was rejected, the French might consider themselves not bound to protect the exiles, should the British make an attempt to seize them forcibly! But Sri Aurobindo was firm. He wouldn't by himself move out of Pondicherry.⁵ That was his chosen place — or God-directed sanctuary — for continuing the work begun at Chandernagore; that was his Gaya where he would one day complete his siddhi; that was where the foundations of a New Heaven and a New Earth would be securely laid. Force, fraud or temptation, Sri Aurobindo endured them all and was master of the situation — "lone, limitless, nude, immune".

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 177.

III

Sri Aurobindo's first four years in Pondicherry were for him a period of "silent Yoga". The outer circumstances — now disturbed, now humdrum — were rather like ripples on the surface which hardly affected the calm assurance and constancy of the ocean's depths. In his merely outward life, Sri Aurobindo was more or less like many others: yet how little this reflected the imponderables of the inner man, the granite strength of the Himalayas of his mind, the sheer infinitudes of his spirit?

Born in Calcutta thirty-seven years earlier, his Odyssey had covered many places, many climes: Darjeeling, Manchester, London, Cambridge, Baroda — and with the return to Calcutta in 1906, the wheel had come full circle. Chandernagore was almost a new start, or more appropriately, the beginning of another upward swing of the spiralling ascent; and Pondicherry was a continuation, an acceleration towards the preordained summit.

Disembarking from SS. *Dupleix* on the afternoon of 4 April 1910, Sri Aurobindo (and Bejoy Nag) had walked down to the Cours Chabrol, and were taken in a jutka (horse-drawn carriage) by Srinivasachariar and Moni to Shankar Chettiar's two-storey house in Rue Camoutty Chetti (Komutti Chetty Street). Sri Aurobindo occupied a room on the second floor of the spacious house till the end of September, and Moni and Bejoy also stayed in the same house. Sri Aurobindo's room had an antique quality about it, he had a wooden cupboard for his use, and he could reach by a ladder the terrace walled around to a height of three feet. Shankar Chettiar had food sent to his guests from his kitchen,

but Moni and Bejoy prepared tea in the mornings. Life was bare in the extreme, and Sri Aurobindo kept himself very much in the background. In the silence of deep seclusion, Sri Aurobindo desired that casual visitors should not be allowed to disturb him.

Apart from the political exiles and revolutionaries already in Pondicherry, occasionally some outsiders too were permitted to meet Sri Aurobindo. One such was K. V. Rangaswami Iyengar, Zemindar of Kodialam, who first met Sri Aurobindo when he was still at Shankar Chettiar's house. Rangaswami Iyengar had been told by his Guru Nagai Japata at the time of his death that a Yogi from the North — Uttara Yogi — would one day come to the South, and could be recognised by three great affirmations of his. Rangaswami Iyengar concluded that the "affirmations" or "sayings" were none other than the "three madnesses" Sri Aurobindo had described in one of his letters to his wife.⁶ Besides rendering some financial assistance, Rangaswami Iyengar also bore the cost of publication of *Yogic Sadhan*, which Sri Aurobindo had composed as if in a spell of automatic writing under the immediate influence of Rammohan Roy. Sri Aurobindo disclaimed personal responsibility for the views given in the book, and in fact it was withdrawn from circulation after 1927.

Another early visitor was 'Va Ra' (V. Ramaswami Iyengar), a Tamil writer and patriot. Before he actually saw Va Ra, Sri Aurobindo had seen him in a vision — seen him, not as he was at the time of meeting, but as he came to look after a year's residence with Sri Aurobindo!⁷

* Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 2.

⁷ Purani, *Life*, p. 169. In his book in Tamil, *Mahakavi Bharatiyar*

A more unusual visitor was M. Paul Richard who came to Pondicherry in mid-1910 on a mission of political campaigning on behalf of his friend Paul Blusion. He was anxious to meet a Yogi, and accordingly a meeting with Sri Aurobindo was arranged by Zir Naidu. Richard and Sri Aurobindo seem to have met twice, and held long conversations. He was requested to explain the significance of a symbol — that of the lotus — which Madame Mirra Richard had sent, and Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the Lotus symbol stood for the opening of the Consciousness to the Divine. He must have made a tremendous impression upon M. Richard, for in his book, *Dawn over Asia*, he described Sri Aurobindo as the greatest of the great men or divine men of Asia, “the leader, the hero of tomorrow”.

One interesting event during the six months' stay at Shankar Chettiar's house was Sri Aurobindo's 23-day fast. He had fasted once earlier — at the Alipur jail — for ten days, throwing away the prison food into the bucket; that had passed for illness with the warders! At Pondicherry, it was a longer trial of endurance, but apparently there were no serious consequences. Sri Aurobindo could walk as usual, and engage in his customary work and continue his sadhana as intensely as ever. Later, Sri Aurobindo explained that, during such periods of fasting, he drew “energy from the vital plane instead of depending on physical sustenance”.⁸

In October 1910, Sri Aurobindo moved from Shankar

(1944), Va Ra writes that he had first been sent by Kodialam Rangaswami Iyengar to Pondicherry to find out whether Sri Aurobindo had indeed come to live there. Va Ra went to Subramania Bharati who took him to Sri Aurobindo.

⁸ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 132.

Chettiar's to a small rented house belonging to one Sundar Chetti in Rue Suffren, and remained there for the next six months. The house had a garden, and they had a little more elbow room. Saurin and Nolini now joined Sri Aurobindo, and thus there were four in the house besides him. In their experiment in communal living, the cooking was done by turns or on a cooperative basis. "I did the rice", Nolini says reminiscently, "Moni took charge of *dal* (pulses), and Bejoy being the expert cooked the vegetables and the curry".⁹

In April 1911, Sri Aurobindo and his disciples made a further move, from Sundar Chetti's to Raghav Chetti's house (4, Rue Saint Louis), where they remained for the next two years. It was during his stay there that Nand Gopal's plan to kidnap Sri Aurobindo and Mayuresan's fraudulent attempt to implicate Sri Aurobindo and the other revolutionaries both misfired and recoiled upon the offenders. Outwardly it was a precarious life still — financially and otherwise — but Sri Aurobindo and the small group around him carried on as though nothing mattered.¹⁰ Nolini was known as Roy, Bejoy was Basak, Moni was called Sacra (short for Chakravarti). It is said that all five inmates had to share the same towel: they had to manage with a candle-lamp and a kerosene-lamp: and they couldn't afford a servant or help. But these privations didn't matter. The young men felt they were in heaven, for Sri Aurobindo was with them, and they basked in the sunshine of his boundless love. He

⁹ *Reminiscences*, p. 61.

¹⁰ Va Ra mentions an occasion when there was no money to buy provisions. There was some rice, chillies, oil and salt, nothing else. But Sri Aurobindo said it was enough. The chillies were fried in oil, and mixed with cooked rice and salt—and that was a full meal! The same day financial help came from a friend. (*Mahakavi Bharatiyar*, p. 86).

was their teacher too, for he taught them Greek, Latin, French and Italian, and in fact life with Sri Aurobindo was perpetual education, a continual flowering of knowledge and wisdom. As at Calcutta in Shyampukur Lane, here at Pondicherry also, Sri Aurobindo's method of teaching a new language was, not through primers and grammars, but to make the pupil plunge into the living waters of its great literature. Nolini began Greek with the *Medea* of Euripides and the *Antigone* of Sophocles, Latin with the *Aeneid*, and Italian with Dante.¹¹ This was also the period when they felt they might indulge a little in the luxury of buying books. With a lavish provision of Rs. 10 per month, they were able to get some of the best literature in the World's Classics and other popular series. And Sri Aurobindo was able to secure the Rig Veda in two volumes and lose himself in its infinite riches of poetry and spirituality.

Sri Aurobindo's Chandernagore host, Motilal Roy, paid a visit to him in 1911 and stayed in Pondicherry for about six weeks, receiving some guidance in his sadhana. After his return to Chandernagore, he continued his financial assistance to Sri Aurobindo, and there was close collaboration between the two, at least till 1920. A letter from Sri Aurobindo to Motilal, dated 3 July 1912, gives a glimpse of the financial situation at the Pondicherry end:

The situation just now is that we have Rs. 1/2 or so in hand... my messenger to the South has not returned... even when he returns, I am not quite

¹¹ Describing what one gains by this method, Nolini writes: "One feels as if one took a plunge into the inmost core of the language, into that secret heart where it is vibrant with life, with the quintessence of beauty, the fullness of strength" (*Reminiscences*, p. 63).

sure about the cash and still less sure about the sufficiency of the amount. No doubt God will provide, but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment. I only hope He does not wish us to learn to live on a minus quantity...¹²

Continued financial stringency was the reason why they had to shift from Raghavan House to a still smaller house in Rue des Missions Etrangeries (now usually referred to as the Mission House). Here they stayed till October 1913 when they moved to a more spacious house in Rue François Martin, where Sri Aurobindo was to remain till October 1922. This house where Sri Aurobindo stayed for nine years is now known as the "Guest House", and is well preserved. Sri Aurobindo had two rooms on the first floor, and he used to have evening talks with his disciples in the veranda in front of one of his rooms. A portrait of Ramakrishna Paramahansa in a state of trance among his disciples used to adorn Sri Aurobindo's table. Among the frequent visitors to the Guest House was Subramania Bharati, the greatest of modern Tamil poets.

It was when they were in the well-ventilated house in Rue François Martin that a relation of Bejoy Nag's, Nagen Nag, came to stay there, ostensibly for reasons of health but really to be with Sri Aurobindo, and be also in a position to tender some financial assistance to him. Nagen had brought with him a companion and cook, Birendra Roy, and he lived with the rest. When one day Biren shaved his head completely, on a sudden impulse Moni shaved his head as well. Actually Biren was a spy, and after a stay of six months in Pondicherry he wished to be replaced by another, who should be able

¹² Purani, *Life*, pp. 175-6.

to recognise him easily on account of his shaven head. But when Moni also shaved his head in spite of being requested not to do so, Biren concluded that the truth was out. A few days later, after taking a little wine, Biren felt moved — “partly out of fear and partly from true repentance, for the most part no doubt by the pressure of some other Force” — to confess that he was really a C.I.D. man, and to sustain his word he produced the money he had received and placed it at Sri Aurobindo’s feet saying: “This is the reward of my evil deed. Never, I shall never do this work again....”¹³ He wept, and the others kept silent.

But Pondicherry — although the ghouls were doubtless there and although the greed for money and the lust for power were strong among the corrupt officials and the goonda-chiefs — was sanctified by the presence of “five noble men” — Shankar Chettiar, Zir Naidu, Ras-sendran, Murugesh Chettiar and Le Beau. When an attempt was made by the French authorities, no doubt under British pressure, to enforce the Aliens Act which required all other than French citizens to register themselves, it was necessary for Sri Aurobindo, Subramania Bharati and the other political exiles to have their application for registration endorsed by at least five Honorary Magistrates. It was in that context that Shankara Chettiar and the other four “noble men” showed truly “remarkable courage and magnanimity”. The crisis passed, as though it had never been. It was in those days that Subramania Bharati wrote *Jayam Undu* (“Victory is Sure”) breathing defiance and faith and hope in victory:

Fear not, heart! Victory is sure!

¹³ Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Reminiscences*, pp. 52-3.

Freedom is ours, here and now!
 The mighty Mother lodges in my heart,
 And *bhakti* shall bear nectarean fruit.
 High are the shoulders, mountain-like,
 And they carry the Mother's golden feet....¹

IV

Sri Aurobindo chose Pondicherry as his "Cave of Tapasya" because it was then French territory, removed further away from Calcutta than Chandernagore, and was yet a part of the Indian subcontinent, a living cell of the Mother India who had inspired millions of her children to sing the soul-stirring anthem, "Bande Mataram!" As we saw, he wouldn't by himself budge from Pondicherry, and neither Darjeeling nor Algeria had attractions for him;¹⁴ and he wouldn't be coaxed or cajoled into returning to British India even after the coming of provincial autonomy in 1937 or to independent India in 1947. Was the choice of Pondicherry as the final seat of his sadhana dictated, not alone by political

¹⁴ Translation by Prema Nandakumar (Vide her *Subramania Bharati* in the National Biography Series, 1968, pp. 35-6). In his book *Mahakavi Bharatiyar*, Va Ra says that he accompanied Bharati to Shankar Chettiar's house to get his help. Shankar Chettiar, on being apprised of the situation, got the required five signatures (his own being one) within two hours in the course of the day. On being asked to sing his latest song, Bharati recited with gusto *Jayam Undu* (pp. 80-1).

¹⁵ When the British made an attempt to exchange France's Indian possessions (notably Pondicherry) for certain areas in the West Indies, Sri Aurobindo wrote to some of his friends in Paris who were able to stall the crucial decision. In the meantime, M. Poincare became Premier and firmly decided against the proposal. Pondicherry remained French, and Sri Aurobindo continued his tapasya there.

or patriotic, but even more peremptorily by other considerations? It was by no means a simple rational decision on his part; it was the *ades* — divine command — that sent him to Pondicherry. But we would be doing nothing improper if we tried to look behind the divine intention and peered a little into the antecedents of Pondicherry.

As to the sort of place Pondicherry was in 1910, Nolini has given an unforgettable picture:

The place was so quiet that we can hardly imagine now what it was really like. It was not quiet, it was actually dead; they used to call it a dead city. There was hardly any traffic, particularly in the area where we lived, and after dusk there was not a soul stirring. It is no wonder they said, "Sri Aurobindo has fixed upon a cemetery for his *sadhana*".

It was a cemetery indeed.... It was like a back-water of the sea, a stagnant pool by the shore....

A cemetery it was no doubt, but one with its full complement of ghouls.¹⁶

Could any place have been more unpromising? Almost a cemetery — ghouls — cheap wine-shops — goonda-raj at night — the rule in theory of "liberty, equality, fraternity", but in reality the reign of crude officialism and decadent feudalism! Where there was not only no healthy and vigorous life, but where perversion passed for purity, where old negations clothed themselves as the new affirmations, where poverty and precariousness were the oxygen the people had to breathe, — where was the use of persevering in such a "god-forsaken" place with

¹⁶ *Reminiscences*, p. 42.

a difficult sadhana and trying to lay the foundations of a New Dispensation?

But there was the other side of the medal too, and this came to light by and by. A French savant, Professor Jouveau Dubreuil, who was then at the College du France in Pondicherry, did some valuable research in local history and archaeology and came upon the discovery that at one time long long ago the place had been called Vedapuri and was a centre of Vedic studies in the South, with a temple dedicated to Vedapurishwara; and by tradition the sage Agastya himself was the guardian spirit of the city which was also a university. The French professor even proved — “from ancient maps and other clues” — that this old centre of Vedic studies had been located in the exact spot where Sri Aurobindo ultimately fixed his permanent dwelling in Pondicherry. The current Tamil name Puducheri (“New Town”) seems also to be of considerable antiquity, and was referred to as “Poduka” by Ptolemy of the second century A.D. and by still earlier writers as well. Pondicherry, then, although superficially so barren and unpromising in 1910, had had its remote days of renown and glory, and therefore had also equally great potentialities for the future.

We have seen in an earlier chapter (III.vi) how Sri Aurobindo came to be interested in Yoga during the latter part of the Baroda period. What attracted him to Yoga is, however, no mystery. He had spent fourteen years in a foreign country, and he had been both warmed up and depressed by the civilisation of the West; in the end he had found it imperfect and insufficient. Western civilisation flamed forth, indeed, on many sides; at once brilliantly alluring and scorchingly devas-

tating; but wasn't its heart a nucleus of Darkness rather than a source of Light? How should it profit man if he gained the whole world but lost his own soul?

During his long stay in England, he had sharpened his intellect, heightened his awareness of things, deepened his sensibility, enriched his store of knowledge and awakened the psychic self which will not contentedly accept tinsel as gold. Returning to India, his one dominant thought was for service of the Mother, Mother India. He watched the barren political scene in India with anger and distress, and began preparing forces from behind the scenes so that he could come forward and act when the right moment came. His first organised work in politics was in the nature of grouping people who accepted the ideal of national independence and were prepared to take up an appropriate action when the call came. Although this was undertaken at an early age, it took a formal shape in or about 1902. Two years later he turned to Yoga — not, indeed, to clarify his ideals in political matters — but to find the spiritual strength that would see him through the task. What first attracted him to Yoga has been described in these terms by Sri Aurobindo in the Uttarpara speech:

When I first approached Him, it was not entirely in the spirit of the Bhakta, it was not entirely in the spirit of the Jnani. I came to Him long ago in Baroda some years before the Swadeshi movement began and I was drawn into the public field. When I approached Him at the time, I hardly had a living faith in Him. The agnostic was in me and I was not absolutely sure that there was a God at all. I did not feel His presence. Yet something drew me to the truth of the Vedas, the truth of

the Gita, the truth of the Hindu religion. I felt there must be a mighty truth in this religion based on the Vedanta.¹⁷

He wished to wrest the Truth somehow and experience it, but not for any selfish reason. He didn't "ask for *mukti*" or personal salvation. He didn't desire power or success or fame for himself. Rather did he pray fervently to God:

If Thou art, then Thou knowest my heart. Thou knowest that I do not ask... for anything which others ask for. I only ask for strength to uplift this nation, I only ask to be allowed to live and work for this people whom I love and to whom I pray that I may devote my life.¹⁸

For himself he wanted nothing. He had always in him a great measure of equanimity, a natural imperturbability in the face of the world and its difficulties. After some inward depression in his adolescence (due, not to any outward circumstances, nor yet amounting to sorrow or melancholy, but no more than a strain in the temperament), this mood of equanimity became fairly settled. His great passion was for work — work for the country, work in its varied forms that were still an offering to the Mother. Whatever results he may have attained through his sadhana, these were striking enough and reinforced his faith in Yoga as a solvent for India's (and the world's) ills.

As regards his early spiritual experiences, some of these have been referred to already. These had begun, in fact, since the very moment he touched Indian soil on his return from England. A vast calm had descended upon him with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay,

¹⁷ *Speeches*, pp. 61-2. ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 62.

his first recontact with the body and spirit of India; and this calm surrounded him and remained with him for many months afterwards. Again, while walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-Sulemani in Kashmir, the realisation of the vacant Infinite stole upon him unbidden as it were. This was the experience that Sri Aurobindo recollected in the tranquillity of later years in this richly evocative poem:

I walked on the high-wayed Seat of Solomon
Where Shankaracharya's tiny temple stands
Facing Infinity from Time's edge, alone
On the bare ridge ending earth's vain romance.

Around me was a formless solitude:
All had become one strange Unnamable,
An unborn sole Reality world-nude,
Topless and fathomless, for ever still...

A lonely Calm and void unchanging Peace
On the dumb crest of Nature's mysteries.¹⁹

Again, the living presence of Kali in one of the temples at Karnali near Chandod on the banks of the Narmada came upon him unawares and filled him with an eerie and stupendous Power leaping out of the sculptured confines. This experience was to be immortalised in a sonnet of later years:

In a town of gods, housed in a little shrine.
From the sculptured limbs the Godhead looked
at me, —

A living Presence deathless and divine,
A Form that harboured all infinity.
The great World-Mother and her mighty will

¹⁹ From a sonnet dated 19 October 1939, (*Last Poems*, 1952, p. 36.)

Inhabited the earth's abysmal sleep...
 Now veiled with mind she dwells and speaks no word,
 Voiceless, inscrutable, omniscient,
 Hiding until our soul has seen, has heard
 The secret of her strange embodiment...²⁰

On another occasion, when he was in imminent danger of a carriage accident in Baroda in the first year of his stay there, he had a vision of the Godhead surging up from within him and mastering and controlling with its gaze the threatening situation. This too Sri Aurobindo has rendered in a sonnet he wrote in 1939, forty-five years after the event:

I sat behind the dance of Danger's hooves
 In the shouting street that seemed a futurist's whim,
 And suddenly felt, exceeding Nature's grooves,
 In me, enveloping me the body of Him.
 Above my head a mighty head was seen,
 A face with the calm of immortality
 And an omnipotent gaze that held the scene
 In the vast circle of its sovereignty...
 The moment passed and all was as before;
 Only that deathless memory I bore.²¹

But these, and others like these, were inner experiences coming of themselves, with a sudden unexpectedness, and were not the clear results of any Yogic sadhana. When presently he started practising *prāṇāyāma*, he did so by himself without a Guru, getting the rule from one of the disciples of Swami Brahmananda of the Ganga Math. At one time, Sri Aurobindo used to practise *prāṇāyāma* for six hours or more a day! At this time there was no conflict between Yoga and politics, and he had no suspicion that there could be any opposition between them.

²⁰ *Last Poems*, p. 16. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 15.

He nevertheless wanted to find a Guru, a master of the secret, who would be able to tell him how to proceed in his endeavour to wrest the ultimate secret of Knowledge and Power from Nature and God. After the contacts with the Naga Sannyasi and Swami Brahmananda (mentioned in chapter III. vi), both of whom impressed him although neither became his Guru, Sri Aurobindo at last found in Yogi Lele a real helper in his sadhana, but this too was only for a short time. We have already explained in an earlier chapter (XI. v) the nature of the advice tendered by Lele and the first astonishing results of Sri Aurobindo's putting it into practice. When Sri Aurobindo was leaving Bombay for Calcutta, he asked Lele how he was to get further instructions for his sadhana. Lele after a little thought asked Sri Aurobindo whether he could surrender himself entirely to the inner Guide within him, and move as it moved him; if so, Sri Aurobindo needed no more instructions from Lele or indeed from anybody else. This Sri Aurobindo accepted, and made that henceforth his rule of sadhana and of life.

And yet the whirl of politics and the ceaseless excitement of political journalism, in which he was unavoidably caught on his return to Calcutta after the Surat Congress and the experience of the static Brahman in Baroda, wasn't an ideal background for Yogic sadhana. There were conflicting pulls, there were underground rumblings, there were lightning flashes in the sky. Where was the ground of sanity between mad acts of repression and maddened spurts of terrorism? Or between the cooings of the Moderates and the caterwaulings of the Anglo-Indian press? To function as a fearless Nationalist leader and as an upright tribune of the people under

those circumstances was as difficult and precarious a task as it would be for the juggler-horseman to keep six balls in the air all at once while riding the storm on a horse that was quite out of control. Even so, Sri Aurobindo ran the incredible race for some months, but it couldn't go on for ever. Sri Krishna intervened at last; and the Muzzaferpore bomb-action and the subsequent year-long incarceration of Sri Aurobindo proved, as we saw, a blessing in disguise to him.

A year's seclusion in the Alipur jail — a year's enforced sadhana — worked no doubt a great transformation in Sri Aurobindo. His horizon widened, the mists cleared, and he was able to see the Divine behind men, things, events, behind the phantasmagoria of the phenomenal world, he was able to see Vasudeva everywhere and in all things. he was able every moment to feel the protective embrace of the Divine Mother. The realisation at Baroda of the silent, spaceless and timeless Brahman had led to a final stillness of consciousness, a sense of the total unreality of the world, an immersion in a nirvanic and fathomless Zero. The Alipur realisation of the omnipresent Divine was the antithesis to that thesis, an infinite affirmation as against that benumbing negation. Nor was this all. Something like a clue to a synthesis had started unfolding itself as well:

To the other two realisations, that of the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects, and that of the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind, he was already on his way in his meditations in Alipur jail.²²

Is Reality "nothing"? Is Reality "everything"? Is it both

²² *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 107-8.

static and dynamic, *sat* and *cit*, *nirguna* and *saguna*? In rare auspicious but unpredictable moments, one stumbles upon such experiences. One opens one's eyes, and there's nothing to see, for the world appears as giant illusion. One opens one's eyes, and there's the apocalypse, there's Vasudeva everywhere. The One is also the Many: the transient is also the Illimitable Permanent. All this is wonderful, of course, but during the play of the normal mental consciousness, it is the variety, the multiplicity, the distinctions, the dichotomies that stand foremost. The fateful "either — or" seems to be that one either seizes and clings to separativity or one plunges and loses oneself in the solvent Unity. One either clings to the mind, its analytical aptitudes, or one exceeds it in moments of trance or ecstasy. But is there no bridge? No easy two-way traffic? No technique of deliberately changing, purifying, transforming the separative consciousness to the unitive, the analytical to the creative? Are there no powers higher than the human mind? Cannot mind be surpassed by supermind? Cannot man become greater man or superman? Cannot earth-life with its obscurations and limitations transform itself into the Life Divine with its lights and puissances?

The classical approaches to the problem of human life on earth have been *either* to denounce it as Maya and try to get for ever beyond it; *or* to accept it with its multitudinous contrarities as the 'lila', as the shadow-play, of the Supreme. The physical, vital and mental: are they but rungs in a ladder, to be forgotten, to be castigated, the ladder itself to be kicked away, the moment one has effected the soul's take-off and it has lost itself in the Self? Human joys and miseries: are they but twists and turns in the Supreme's dance of self-delight? Are human

beings no more than flies to wanton boys? Phenomenal life — life in the body, senses, mind — is what we know and experience. Neither denying it totally nor reducing it to Somebody's playful rapture can charge life with purpose. But if the purpose of life is to *evolve* — not escape into some far off Empyrean — if it is progressively to *manifest* the Divine (not become the Divine's toy), then surely the technology of transformation and manifestation remains to be discovered and put into practice. And this precisely was Sri Aurobindo's preoccupation.

According to his own admission, during his prison days at Alipur Sri Aurobindo was already on his way to the realisation of "the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind". When he was asked many years later whether the "Supermind" was his own idea, he answered:

It is not my thought or idea. I have told you before that after the Nirvana experience I had no 'thoughts' of my own. Thoughts used to come from above. From the beginning I didn't feel Nirvana to be the highest spiritual achievement. Something in me always wanted to go on further. But even then I didn't ask for this new experience. In fact, in Nirvana, with that peace, one does not ask for anything. But the truth of the Supermind was put into me.²³

Sri Aurobindo further explained that it was the spirit of Vivekananda that first gave Him "a clue in the direction of the Supermind". Clarifying it further, he said:

He (Vivekananda) didn't say "Supermind". "Supermind" is my own word. He just said to me, "This is this, this is that", and so on. That was how he proceeded — by pointing and indicating. He visited

²³ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 211-2.

me for 15 days in Alipur jail and, until I could grasp the whole thing, he went on teaching me and impressed upon my mind the working of the Higher Consciousness — the Truth-Consciousness in general — which leads towards the Supermind. He would not leave until he had put it all into my head.²⁴

Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo has said that, after the first tentative beginnings of his Yoga through *prāṇāyāma* and other practices, it took him some four years of inner striving to find a real way, “and even then, it seemed to come by an accident”.²⁵ In those three days when he shut himself up with Lele in a room in Mazumdar’s house at Baroda, Sri Aurobindo was a hijacked traveller of the worlds of vacant forms and a diver at last into the sea of Nirvanic immobility and inconscience. That first realisation could have been the enduring last one too, for that itself brought “an inexpressible Peace, a stupendous silence, an infinity of release and freedom”.²⁶ But, actually, with Sri Aurobindo it was but the start towards the ultimate goal. From the veritable Nadir of Inconscience touched at Baroda, there were surges forward and bold leaps till there was a landing at the opposite pole or Zenith of Superconscience. Between Nadir and Zenith, Inconscience and Superconscience, Nirvana and Sachchidananda, — all the worlds invited exploration and conquest. But this meant many more years of “intense Yoga under a supreme guidance to trace it out”, and so much effort was necessary because “I had my past and the world’s past to assimilate and overpass before I could find and found the future”.²⁷ Without denying

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 212; also *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 115.

²⁵ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 126. ²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 154.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 126.

the Nirvanic experience, Sri Aurobindo was able at Alipur to rear on the foundations of the Peace and silence and freedom other and even greater realisations: first, the triune perception of "an immense Divine Reality behind it (the Nirvana) and a supreme Divine Reality above it and an intense Divine Reality at the heart of everything that had seemed at first only a cinematic shape or shadow",²⁸ and, second, the exploration of consciousness beyond the Mind. If below Mind, Senses and Body, Sri Aurobindo had plumbed at Baroda the seas of Inconscience with their depths of incomprehensibility, movements of insensate shadows and prevalence of total formlessness, at Alipur, the ambrosial taste of the Divine in all things and the feel of the Divine caress at all times helped him to take off — with Vivekananda playing the role of Paraclete — from Mind's long runway and soar into the regions of the Superconscious, soar higher and higher, careering towards the Supermind.

One result of these experiences and realisations was that Sri Aurobindo saw that the perennial truths of Sanatana Dharma or Eternal Religion both included and transcended the endless vicissitudes of political action. Even earlier, he had never as a rule brought any rancour into his politics; he never entertained any hatred for England or the English people. He had always based his claim for freedom on India's inherent right to freedom, not simply on any charges of misgovernment or oppression. And if he ever attacked persons, attacked even violently — as he did Gokhale, Morley or Minto — it was for their views or for the nature of their participation in public affairs, and not with reference to their personal or private life. After Alipur, Sri Aurobindo's

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 154.

politics underwent a further change and transformation, and became merely the image of *niṣkama karma*, a part of the broader discipline of Yoga. Withersoever it might lead him, he must now follow the inner direction so that he might gain perfect control over the instruments of purposive action that were lodged deep and veiled within. A Rishi Vishvamitra is said to have created a whole new world so that King Trishuncou could sing his Hymn of Triumph:

I shall not die.

Although this body, when the spirit tires
Of its cramped residence, shall feed the fires,
My house consumed, not I...

I hold the sky

Together and upbear the teeming earth.
I was the eternal thinker at my birth
And shall be, though I die.²⁹

In received mythology, that was a pyrrhic victory which wasted Vishvamitra's gains of *tapas* without winning for Trishuncou quite what he wanted. Neither here on earth, nor there in Indra's heaven, but in some incredible space-station in mid-air! What Sri Aurobindo strove for was something quite different: it was to change the world, this world, to transfigure into a New Heaven and a New Earth *this* bank and *these* meadows of Time. As he recapitulated in the course of an interview with Dilip Kumar Roy:

I too wanted at one time to transform through my Yoga the face of the world. I had wanted to change the fundamental nature and movements of humanity, to exile all the evils which affect morta-

²⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. I, p. 140.

lity.... It was with this aim and outlook that I turned to Yoga in the beginning, and I came to Pondicherry because I had been directed by the Voice to pursue my Yoga here.³⁰

Between Alipur and Pondicherry, there had intervened the *Karmayogin* phase when an attempt was made to transform politics into Sanatana Dharma, the marching orders to go to Chandernagore, the startlingly unexpected experience of a fission and a fusion of consciousness, and the fresh marching orders to proceed further to complete the work in the preordained "Cave of Tapasya".

V

We have seen how, after his arrival in Pondicherry on 4 April 1910, Sri Aurobindo lived at various places — Shankar Chettiar's house, Sundaram Chettiar's house, Raghavan House, Mission House, and the house in Rue François Martin ('Guest House'). Far from Calcutta's bureaucratic fever-paroxysms and the incessant rumble and rattle of politics, far from his closest relations (his wife, his sister and the rest), far from his colleagues and collaborators (Nivedita, Shyamsundar), far from Chandernagore and the cover afforded by Motilal Roy, at Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo started life anew and launched into an uncertain future that was also a future of infinite possibility. There were young men like Bejoy, Moni and Nolini to minister to his needs, and to receive the bounty of his love and instruction and silent guidance. There were the other political exiles and revolutionaries — Bharati, Srinivasachariar, V. V. S. Aiyar — who had

³⁰ The interview is published in Dilip's *Among the Great*.

frequent contacts with Sri Aurobindo with whom they made a seminal world within the bleak world of Pondicherry, at once a source of irritation and menace to the British authorities in India and the seed-bed for India's coming regeneration. Sri Aurobindo's outer circumstances — the obscurity, the insecurity, the enforced austerity — bore, however, no relation to the ardours and advances of his Yoga in the secret caverns of his soul.

We do not, of course, know what exactly happened during those four years of "silent Yoga". Sri Aurobindo had made certain test flights and divings at Alipur and at Chandernagore. Neither the heights nor the depths were thus foreign to him. The descent from mind to matter, the ascent from mind to Supermind: he had experienced both. The problem was, at each stage of ascent, to link it with all the steps of descent: and, in each span of descent, to infer all the involved tiers of ascent. To mark the fission between the higher and lower spheres of Reality and at the same time to engineer a process — a whole chain-reaction — of fusion and thereby encompass a feat of transformation! If the ascent is not to be a flight and an escape for ever but is designed to bring the new gains to the depths: if the exploration of the depths is not to be a drowning and a dissolution but a scouring and churning resulting in the surfacing of involved nectar — then it follows that the upward and the downward movements, the ascent and the descent, must be continuously teamed together so that at every stage a reconciliation, consolidation and integration can be ensured. Of the kind of Yoga or tapasya on which Sri Aurobindo was engaged, tentatively at Alipur, experimentally at Chandernagore, and in sustained and total absorption at Pondicherry, we have

random if significant hints in some of his later poems. Thus about the exploration of the forbidding depths of the Inconscience:

He who would bring the heavens here
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way...

I have been digging deep and long
Mid a horror of filth and mire...
I have laboured and suffered in Matter's night
To bring the fire to men....³¹

Again, in a sonnet of 1938, 'The Pilgrim of the Night':

I made an assignation with the Night:
In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:
In my breast carrying God's deathless light
I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.
I left the glory of the illumined Mind
And the calm rapture of the divinised soul
And travelled through a vastness dim and blind
To the grey shore where her ignorant waters roll.
I walk by the chill wave through the dull slime
And still that weary journeying knows no end;
Lost is the lustrous godhead beyond Time,
There comes no voice of the celestial Friend,
And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.³²

This is a far cry from the realisation described in 'Nirvana':

³¹ *Poems Past and Present*, pp. 5-6.

³² *Last Poems*, p. 5.

Only the illimitable Permanent

Is here. A peace stupendous, featureless, still

Replaces all....³³

or the thrilled delight of the soul's emancipation conveyed in the lines:

My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,

My body is God's happy living tool,

My spirit a vast sun of deathless light.³⁴

Now it is deliberate descent, a purposeful push into the interior of Night; the descent is to bring up the hidden pearls of great price, the push is for the purpose of opening up a corridor for the Light streaming from above. Every upward leap is to be followed by a corresponding transformation below, and the total light of Superconscience must invade the total night of Inconscience wholly to transform it.

Between the Baroda experience of January 1908 and the completion of the quest and discovery in 1914, there lay an arid stretch of years to all outward appearance (politics, prison-life, politics with a difference, self-exilement, poverty and privation), but under the surface the roots of life were rich with sap ready to burst into the sunshine of a glorious day. It took some years (five or six) for the seeming waste land to leap into life, but that was only because Sri Aurobindo had his and the world's past "to assimilate and overpass" before he could "find and found the future". Forerunners in the past had made many an invasion of the Invisible, many an assault on Reality, and had experimented with divers beliefs and ways of living and divers techniques of self-

³³ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 298.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 197.

realisation. The grand trunk road of human history was marked with the hooves of materialism, atheism, pantheism, theism, idealism, transcendentalism, pragmatism, hedonism, nihilism, and the atmosphere still reverberated with the sighs and groans and hopes and ecstatic cries of the votaries of one or another religion. And Sri Aurobindo had himself passed through the stages of rationalist, agnostic, sceptic, advaitin, bhakta, shakta — and he had to gather into one vast synthesis the variegated, and sometimes conflicting and contradictory, elements of his own and the world's spiritual experience and of the several Yoga disciplines of the past. But once he had found the key to the synthesis in the Supermind, the rest was not very difficult. The new synthesis of knowledge called also for a new integral Yoga for the translation of the logical possibility into realised actuality: this Yoga had to be a delicate, powerful and multi-pronged movement in consciousness, comprehending, reconciling and exceeding the two fundamental categories of experience, Matter and Spirit, and the three classical high roads to release and realisation, *Jñāna*, *Karma* and *Bhakti*, and harnessing above all the breakthrough spiritual force of sovereign Supermind.

It was a significant victory, no doubt; but the victory was also tinged with disappointment. As he told Dilip Kumar Roy:

It was then that my outlook changed with the knowledge born of my new Yogic consciousness. But then I found, to my utter disillusionment, that it was only my ignorance which had led me to think that the impossible was feasible here and now... in order to help humanity out, it was not enough for an individual, however great, to achieve

an ultimate solution individually; humanity has to be ripe for it too.³⁵

If this realisation of his powerlessness to alter the face of the world with a mere flourish of his Yogic wand did indeed disillusion him, it at least indicated clearly enough his future line of action. He would not attempt the establishment of a Golden Age, a Satya Yuga, a New Heaven and a New Earth, all at once; that might prove a fiasco no better than the Trishuncou-Swarga of Vishvamitra's creation. What Sri Aurobindo could do was to convey to others the lights that were the enduring gains of his Yoga and his well-grounded hopes for the supramentalisation of human nature and of all terrestrial existence. Perhaps some few choice spirits at least would hearken and respond to the paean of hope and the lure of the Light, and join Sri Aurobindo in structuring the conditions favourable for the descent of the Supramental Light and its acceptance and absorption by all the levels of terrestrial existence down to the physical and the inconscient. In the meantime, he would work with the chosen instruments and await the phoenix hour when this "too too sullied" earth that was heavy and in travail would give birth to a supramentalised blissful world:

...for the golden age
In Kali comes, the iron lined with gold,
The Yoga shall be given back to men,
The sects shall cease, the grim debates die out
And atheism perish from the Earth,
Blasted with knowledge, love and brotherhood
And wisdom repossess Sri Krishna's world.³⁶

³⁵ *Among the Great* (Jaico Edition), pp. 219-20.

³⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 140.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ARYA: A GOD'S LABOUR

I

It was mentioned in the previous chapter (XVI. iii) that, soon after Sri Aurobindo's arrival in 1910, he was met by M. Paul Richard who was on a visit to Pondicherry. They had two fruitful meetings, and Richard afterwards said to a Japanese audience:

The hour is coming of great things, of great events, and also of great men, the divine men of Asia. All my life I have sought for them across the world, for all my life I have felt they must exist somewhere in the world, that this world would die if they did not live. For they are its light, its heat, its life. It is in Asia that I found the greatest among them — the leader, the hero of tomorrow.

He is a Hindu. His name is Aurobindo Ghose.¹

Another French visitor who met Sri Aurobindo not long after his coming to Pondicherry was Madame Alexandra David-Neel, who was in India lured by the wisdom and the mysteries of the Orient. Recalling that meeting of long, long ago, Madame David-Neel is reported to have said recently:

His perfect familiarity with the philosophies of India and the West wasn't what drew my attention: what was of a greater importance to me was the special magnetism that flew out of his presence, and the occult hold he had over those who surrounded him.

¹ *Dawn over Asia.*

She met him in a room with a large window which, being left open, was "filled with that greenish sky of India, a fit background indeed for a Master, a Guru of his dimension". Four young men — probably Bejoy, Moni, Nolini and Saurin — "stood near one corner of the table: they were tall, stout, immobile, with eyes fixed on the Master's face, much like four marble statues". At one stage she wished they would leave the room so that she might ask Sri Aurobindo a few questions of a confidential nature. As if he had read her thought and had communicated it instantaneously to the young men, they "walked out of the room, stiff, silent, like four robots drawn out of sight, pulled by an invisible string".²

M. Richard had in the meantime told Madame Mirra Richard about his own meetings and how Sri Aurobindo had explained the symbolism of the Yogachakra lotus as the mystic opening of the bud of consciousness to the warmth of the Divine Sun. Born on 21 February 1878 in Paris, from her early years Mirra had been a child apart, given to silent self-absorption. As a young girl, she used to take walks in the woods of Fontainebleau, and she would often sit at the foot of an ancient tree, communing with Nature for hours. From about the age of twelve, she began nurturing great aspirations, dreaming dreams and seeing visions. Night after night she felt the world's burden of pain pressing upon her, but at her healing touch that burden was exorcised away. She studied occultism at Algeria under the guidance of a master, M. Théon, and her progress was rapid. Back in Paris, her house on Rue du Val de Grace became the

² From the report of an interview by Prithwindra Mukherjee, published in the *Sunday Standard*, 15 June 1969.

centre of a group of ardent young seekers, one of them being Alexandra David (David-Neel after her marriage). They felt that the evils of ignorance, oppression and violence must be fought and overthrown, and transformed into knowledge, freedom and peace. In 1912, Mirra Richard recorded that "the general aim to be attained is the advent of a progressive universal harmony... through the awakening in all and the manifestation by all of the inner Divinity which is One. In other words, — to create unity by founding the Kingdom of God which is within us all".³

For quite some time, she had encountered in her dreams saintly personages, many of whom she presently met in real life. But the face — which she called 'Krishna' — that appeared again and again, this face she was not to meet till some years later. On Paul Richard reporting to her about his conversations with Sri Aurobindo — especially about his explanation of the lotus symbolism — Mirra felt a responsive chord and was most eager to meet this "leader", this "hero of tomorrow". She started keeping a Diary too, recording her thoughts daily after meditation at five in the morning, sitting near a window with a shawl wrapped round her; the jottings were really transcripts of her conversations with the Divine! On 1 February 1914 she wrote:

...identified with Thy divine love, I contemplate the earth and its creatures, this mass of substance put into forms perpetually destroyed and renewed, this swarming mass of aggregates which are dissolved as soon as constituted, of beings who imagine that they are conscient and permanent

³ *Words of the Mother* (3rd edition, 1946), p. 5.

individualities and who are as ephemeral as a breath, always alike or almost the same, in their diversity, repeating indefinitely the same desires, the same tendencies, the same appetites, the same ignorant errors.⁴

That is the general rule. But periodically the Divine Light "shines in a being and radiates through him over the world"; such are the Sanatanas, the Saviours, the Messiahs who have leavened our existence in the past. Yet more is needed now:

But how much greater a splendour than all that have gone before, how marvellous a glory and light would be needed to draw these beings out of the horrible aberration in which they are plunged by the life of cities and so-called civilisations! What a formidable and, at the same time, divinely sweet puissance would be needed to turn aside all these wills from the bitter struggle for their selfish, mean and foolish satisfactions, to snatch them from this vortex which hides death behind its treacherous glitter, and turn them towards Thy conquering harmony!

Her prayer and aspiration on 2 February was equally significant:

O Lord, I would be a love so living that it can fill every solitude and assuage every sorrow.

O Lord, I cry to Thee: make me a burning brazier which consumes all suffering and transforms it

⁴ *Prayers and Meditations of the Mother* (1948), p. 47. (The original is in French, *Prières et Méditations de la Mère*, but the quotations are all from the English version, first published in 1941 and reprinted in an enlarged edition in 1948).

into a glad light pouring its rays into the hearts of all!⁵

A greater splendour than the Lights of the past was needed to meet the crisis created by massive technology and maddening urbanisation, and — wasn't she hoping that Sri Aurobindo "the hero of tomorrow" might prove to be such a Splendour? As for herself she was ready to be transformed into a burning brazier of "pure love and limitless compassion".

By the beginning of March 1914, she was getting ready for the intended journey to the East. As she turned to the future, she wished it might be "the beginning of a new inner period".⁶ On board the *Kaga Maru*, she wrote on 8 March:

In front of this calm sunrise which turned within me into silence and peace, at the moment when I grew conscious of Thee and Thou alone wast living in me, O Lord, it seemed to me that I adopted all the inhabitants of this ship, and enveloped them in an equal love.... Not often had I felt so strongly Thy divine power....⁷

The boat itself seemed to her "a marvellous abode of peace, a temple sailing in Thy honour".⁸ Day followed day, and realisation was piled on realisation, as if she were indeed voyaging towards His Divine Presence. In the solitude of the desert and during the silent pure nights, she felt His majestic Presence, she experienced His bountiful Love. On 23 March she recorded that, in her view, the ideal state would be to be conscious with the Divine Consciousness, so that we would know "every moment, spontaneously, without any necessity of reflec-

⁵ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 48. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 70. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 71.

tion, exactly what we should do to express in the best way" the Divine Law." And the very next day she wrote that such perfect identification with the Divine Consciousness was one of the things she expected from her journey to India, for she learned to look on India as her true spiritual home.

Travelling by train from Dhanushkoti, as it approached Pondicherry on 29 March, she had the occult experience of a great Light shining from the centre of the town, and the awareness of the Light grew more intense when she actually arrived.¹⁰ At 3.30 the same afternoon, she met Sri Aurobindo in the upstairs of his house in Rue François Martin. At the very first sight, recognition came like a flash of lightning: Sri Aurobindo was verily the 'Krishna' she had met so often in her dreams. There was no need for speech, she sat at Sri Aurobindo's feet and closed her eyes, only her mind was open to him. A great silence now encompassed her and flooded her soul. There was a breaking of past intellectual moulds, a dissolution of arduous mental constructions, followed by a new crystallisation in the image of total identification with the incarnate Divine. When she took up her pen after the usual meditation next morning, this was the entry she made:

Little by little the horizon becomes precise, the path becomes clear. And we advance to an ever greater certitude.

It matters not if there are hundreds of beings plunged in densest ignorance. He whom we saw

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁰ This is reminiscent of Madhurakavi being irresistibly lured by a Southern Light and his finding it in the person of Nammalvar at Alwattirunagari in Tirunelveli District in South India.

yesterday is on earth: His presence is enough to prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light, when Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth.

O Lord, Divine Builder of this marvel, my heart overflows with joy and gratitude....¹¹

Again, on 1 April 1914:

A great joy, a deep peace reign in me, and yet all my inner constructions have vanished like a vain dream, and I find myself now before Thy immensity, without any frame or system... a new stage has begun.¹²

In their subsequent meetings and conversations, each found in the other a kindred soul and a spiritual comrade. Although separated by thousands of miles, they had independently worked broadly on the same lines, aspired and hoped and striven for the same ends. She had one monumental doubt, however; hadn't all efforts in the past to redeem the human condition and to found an Earthly Paradise failed invariably? But Sri Aurobindo assured her that this time there should be — there would be — no failure because of his discovery of the principle and power of the Supermind. For Madame Mirra this was Assurance enough, and there would henceforth be no room for uncertainty or doubt. She realised that the new period that was opening before her was "a period of expansion rather than of concentration".¹³ The divinisation of Man, the transformation of Nature, that was still the cardinal aim; but the force within had to be perfected first before it could be turned to the tasks of changing the external world. A total and

¹¹ *Prayers and Meditations*, pp. 88-9. ¹² *ibid.*, p. 89.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 89.

absolute surrender to the Supreme would be the means of uniting the motion and the act, the essence and the descent. And so the final plunge of *ātma-samarpaṇa* — an unfreezing of all barriers — and a melting and a merging in the waters of Felicity; and she wrote in her Diary on 10 April:

Suddenly the veil was rent, the horizon was disclosed. Before the clear vision my whole being threw itself at Thy feet in a great outburst of gratitude....

I seem to have no more limits; there is no longer the perception of the body, no sensations, no feelings, no thoughts.... A clear, pure, tranquil immensity, penetrated with love and light, filled with an unspeakable beatitude, is all that is there, and that alone seems now to be myself....¹⁴

In the strength of this perfect certitude, in the beauty of this calm serenity, she dedicated herself anew to the relief of the giant agony of the world and its transformation and ultimate divinisation.

II

One result of the meetings of the Richards with Sri Aurobindo and discussions between them was the decision to launch a philosophical magazine, *Arya*, that should give to the world a grand synthesis of knowledge and Yogic experience, and project with all the lineaments of logical exposition Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Future. The decision was taken on 1 June, but the first monthly issue was to come out only on Sri Aurobindo's

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 95.

forty-second birthday, 15 August 1914. Although Alexandra David-Neel received the impression that Sri Aurobindo had a "perfect familiarity with the philosophies of India and the West", he himself disclaimed any such deep intimacy. As he once wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy:

And philosophy! Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never, never was a philosopher — although I have written philosophy.... I knew precious little about philosophy before I did the Yoga and came to Pondicherry — I was a poet and a politician, not a philosopher! How I managed to do it and why? First, because Paul Richard proposed to me to cooperate in a philosophical review — and as my theory was that a Yogi ought to be able to turn his head to anything, I could not very well refuse: and then he had to go to war and left me in the lurch with sixty-four pages a month of philosophy all to write by my lonely self! Secondly, because I had to write down in the terms of the intellect all that I had observed and come to know in practising Yoga daily, the philosophy was there automatically....¹⁵

It was also decided that the *Arya* should have a French counterpart, *Revue de la Grande Synthèse*, consisting mainly of translations from the English journal. The assured collaboration of the Richards made such a double venture well within the realm of practical realisation. The journals were to be published from the Richards' house in Rue Dupleix, but it was understood from the beginning that the main inspiration behind the venture would be Sri Aurobindo and almost the whole brunt of

¹⁵ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me* (Jaico Edition: 1964), p. 33.

the burden too was to fall upon him after the first few months.

On Bepin Pal's persuasion, Sri Aurobindo had become de facto editor of the *Bande Mataram* in 1906, and he was also the directing force behind its revolutionary Bengali counterpart, *Yugantar*. After his acquittal in 1909, he had started on his own the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma*, with a marked shift in emphasis from politics to politics *cum* Sanatana Dharma. And now, five years after, he was to launch the *Arya* and the *Revue*, philosophical journals both, with far horizons and a global and integral outlook. Sri Aurobindo's Yoga had already been spread over twelve years, and he had assimilated and overpassed his own and the world's past, and had reached the stage when it was incumbent on him to lay the foundations of the future. The *Arya* would now give him an opportunity to share with others — in the language of philosophy — the results of his deepest probings into the structure of Existence and his farthest telescopings into a probable and possible future.

Paul Richard himself was enthusiastic enough, and Mirra was filled with a sense of vast expectancy. There were the details of planning to attend to — and the splendid executrix in her took complete charge of the situation. On 3 June, she wrote in her Diary:

Now that the whole being is plunged more and more into a material activity and physical realisation which carries with it such a multitude of details I must think over and regulate, I appeal to Thee, O Lord, that my consciousness, thus turned towards outer things, may constantly preserve this communion with Thee....¹⁶

¹⁶ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 129.

On 4 June, she recorded that the two supreme obstacles to realisation, the two impediments to the action of the Divine Law, were "the darkness of ignorance and the black smoke of egoistic ill-will".¹⁷ People were ignorant: and people were selfish and perverse, which was even worse. The light of knowledge and the warmth of love were the only cure for "the inertia of a heavy ignorance or the resistance of an uncomprehending ill-will". She accordingly spelt out the entire justification for the projected launching of the two journals, but warned at the same time, that while knowledge was necessary, one had to go beyond it too:

We must first conquer knowledge, that is to say, learn how to know Thee, to be united with Thee, and all means are good and can be employed to attain this end. But it would be a great mistake to think that all is done when this end is attained.... To know Thee, first and before everything else, yes; but once the knowledge of Thee is acquired, there remains all the work of Thy manifestation; and then intervene the quality, force, complexity and perfection of that manifestation....

Before the immensity of the programme, the whole being exults and sings to Thee a hymn of gladness.¹⁸

And, the very next day: "It is a veritable work of creation we have to do: create new activities and new modes of being, so that this Force, unknown to the earth till now, may manifest in its plenitude".¹⁹

But soon the rumblings of war were heard in Europe, and throughout July 1914 the diplomatic moves and counter-moves in the great chancellories of the world

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 130. ¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 133-4. ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 135.

kept everybody guessing. And when war broke out at last and the German armies swept through Belgium and began overrunning France reaching almost the outskirts of Paris, the Richards felt shaken. They were on a visit to French India ostensibly on an electioneering mission, though the real purpose — at least as far as Mirra Richard was concerned — was to meet Sri Aurobindo. The war was a severe shock to them, and Sri Aurobindo too, with his profound understanding of French history and insight into the French genius and character, had his anxieties and forebodings. Notwithstanding the war, however, the first issue of the *Arya* came out as originally planned. But an inkling into her mind and sensibility is provided by some of the Diary entries of this period, and in these she seems to be speaking, not for herself alone, but for Sri Aurobindo as well. Thus on 4 August 1914:

Men, pushed by the conflict of forces, are making a sublime sacrifice, they are offering their lives in a sanguinary holocaust....²⁰

Later entries are equally moving:

O Lord, we know that it is a grave hour for the earth; those who can be Thy intermediaries with her to make arise out of the conflict a greater harmony, and out of the obscure ugliness a diviner beauty, must be ready to do it....²¹

Monstrous forces have swept down upon the earth like a hurricane, they are dark and violent, powerful and blind. Give us the force, O Lord, to illumine them....²²

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 167. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 169.

²² *ibid.*, p. 170.

All errors, all prejudices, all misunderstandings must disappear in this whirlwind of destruction which is sweeping away the past....²³

O Lord, Lord, the whole earth is convulsed; she groans and suffers, she is in anguish.... It must not be that all this suffering has fallen upon her in vain; grant that all this blood which has been poured out may produce a more rapid germination of all the seeds of beauty, light and love which have to cover the earth with their rich harvest....²⁴

O Lord, this earth groans and suffers; chaos has made this world its abode.

The Darkness is so great that Thou alone canst dispel it. Come, manifest Thyself, that Thy work may be accomplished.²⁵

It is the voice of humanity wrung from the depths, it is the conscience of humanity speaking out, it is the still sad music of humanity invoking the Divine's effective intervention. Despair wars with hope, terror is exceeded by pity, and yet beyond the poisoned present a redeemed future is resolutely inferred. The entry for 31 August is most significant:

In this formidable disorder and terrible destruction can be seen a great working, a necessary toil preparing the earth for a new sowing which will rise in marvellous spikes of grain and give to the world the shining harvest of a new race.... The vision is clear and precise, the plan of Thy divine law so plainly traced that peace has come back and installed itself as a sovereign in the hearts of the workers.²⁶

²³ *ibid.*, p. 174. ²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 177. ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 180. ²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 182-3.

There is another invasion of doubt and darkness a few days later:

Darkness has descended upon earth, dense, violent, victorious.... All is sorrow, panic and destruction in the physical world, and the splendour of the light of Thy love seems darkened by a veil of mourning....

Time presses: O Lord, the powers divine must come to the succour of the anguished earth.²⁷

The Divine's answer was: "Turn and face the danger.... Look straight at the danger and it will vanish before the Power".²⁸ The ruling motto had to be to "conquer at any cost". Then, on 25 September, the ambrosial recodation:

Thou hast accepted us as fit intermediaries between the unthinkable realities and the relativities of the physical world, and Thy constant presence in our midst is a token of Thy active collaboration.

The Lord has willed and Thou dost execute:

A new light shall break upon the earth,

A new world shall be born,

And the things that were announced shall be

fulfilled.²⁹

While the outer gloom cast by the war was to continue for some years, the inner mist raised by the invasion of doubt wholly cleared, and gave place to the sovereign light of assurance that ultimate victory was sure and that the rebuilding of the House of Humanity would not long be delayed.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 194.

III

The *Arya* placed before itself a twofold object: firstly, "a systematic study of the highest problems of existence"; and, secondly, "the formation of a vast synthesis of knowledge, harmonising the divers religious traditions of humanity, occidental as well as oriental". The journal would pursue the safe sane method of realism — not simply restrictive naturalism but a realism that was rational as well as transcendental, running purposefully together the intellectual and scientific disciplines on the one hand and, on the other, the lights and lightning revelations of intuitive experience. The journal would give, not merely studies in speculative philosophy, but also translations of ancient texts and commentaries on them, essays in comparative religion, and practical suggestions regarding "inner culture and self-development".

In choosing the name *Arya* for his journal, Sri Aurobindo couldn't of course have wanted to convey any suggestions of racial superiority. "Aryan" was for Sri Aurobindo a concept, an ideal, and not — what it became for Hitler later on — the name of the Blonde Beast of the Nordic race, the chosen race. Explaining the significance of the name in an early issue of the journal, Sri Aurobindo said:

...the word in its original use expressed, not a difference of race, but a difference of culture. For in the Veda, the Aryan peoples are those who had accepted a particular type of self-culture, of inward and outward practice, of ideality, of aspiration....

In later times, the word *Arya* expressed a particular ethical and social ideal, an ideal of well-governed life, candour, courtesy, nobility, straight

dealing, courage, gentleness, purity, humanity, compassion, protection of the weak, liberality, observance of social duty, eagerness for knowledge, respect for the wise and learned... the combined ideal of the Brahman and the Kshatriya....

Intrinsically, in its most fundamental sense, Arya means an effort or an uprising and overcoming. The Aryan is he who strives and overcomes all outside him and within him that stands opposed to the human advance. Self-conquest is the first law of his nature.... For in everything he seeks truth, in everything right, in everything height and freedom....

Self-perfection is the aim of his self-conquest. Therefore what he conquers he does not destroy, but ennobles and fulfils... always the Aryan is a worker and warrior. He spares himself no labour of mind or body, whether to seek the Highest or to serve it. He avoids no difficulty, he accepts no cessation from fatigue. Always he fights for the coming of that kingdom within himself and in the world.³⁰

The word "Arya", then, connotes certain qualities of the mind and heart, certain aptitudes and aspirations, and has no reference whatever to "race". An austere and uncompromising aspiration and a sustained and determined endeavour alone mark the true Aryan; and when, after his trials and ascents, he reaches his goal at last, he becomes the perfected Aryan, the "Arhat", master of the three rungs of the ascending spiral of consciousness, the individual, the cosmic-universal and the transcendent:

The perfected Arhat is he who is able to live simultaneously in all these three apparent states of

³⁰ *Victors and Reviews* (1946), pp. 4-9.

existence, elevate the lower into the higher, receive the higher into the lower, so that he may represent perfectly in the symbols of the world that with which he is identified in all parts of his being, — the triple and triune Brahman.³¹

From this it surely follows that the Arhat is potentially lodged as much within an Asian as within a European, and no one indeed, whatever his race, colour, creed, caste or nationality, is denied the possibility of realising this potentiality and becoming a true Arhat, almost answering to the description of the "Jivanmukta":

Although consenting here to a mortal body,

He is Undying; limit and bond he knows not...³²

Simultaneously almost, Sri Aurobindo's collaborator was also setting down similar thoughts in her Diary. Humanity had to advance, from the average human to the pure Arhat ideal. Works, knowledge, love — Agni, Indra, Soma — were important, yet "some new splendour... some possibility of a higher and more integral realisation" was needed if "one more step forward" was to be taken towards the Divine manifestation on the earth.³³ And in the entry for 5 October 1914, she explained the evolutionary process that would change man to greater man, superman:

In the calm silence of Thy contemplation, O Divine Master, Nature is fortified and tempered anew. All principle of individuality is overpassed, she is plunged in Thy infinity that allows oneness to be realised in all domains without confusion, without disorder. The combined harmony of that which persists, that which progresses and that

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 10. ³² *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 286.

³³ *Prayers and Meditations*, pp. 195-7.

which eternally is, is little by little accomplished in an always more complex, more extended and more lofty equilibrium. And this interchange of the three modes of life allows the plenitude of the manifestation.³⁴

The *Arya* was altogether a bold and unique adventure: it was much more than just an attempt to forge a new "synthesis" of knowledge, it was very different from an exercise in academic scholarship, it was not an elegant or ingenious variation of one, or a mixture, of the traditional philosophies. The real aim of the journal was, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, "to feel out for the thought of the future, to help in shaping its foundations and to link it to the best and most vital thought of the past". This was audacious futurist research and reconstruction on the basis of intuitive thought and sustained tapasya. The human soul, caught in the process of evolution in the prison of matter and life, would nevertheless shape the prison itself into a field of experimentation, a place of sadhana, to bring about its transformation. The faculty of reason, instead of dissipating itself in self-defeating activities, must develop new goals, new powers, and prepare the human mind for a decisive new advance:

The problem of thought is to find out the right idea and the right way of harmony; to restate the ancient and eternal spiritual truth of Self so that it shall re-embrace, permeate and dominate the mental and physical life; to develop the most profound and vital methods of psychological self-discipline and self-development so that the mental and psychological life of man may express the spiritual life through the utmost possible expansion of its

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 197.

own riches, power and complexity; and to seek for the means and motives by which his external life, his society and his institutions may remould themselves progressively in the truth of the spirit and develop towards the utmost possible harmony of individual freedom and social unity.³⁵

Here in a nutshell Sri Aurobindo had stated "our ideal and our search"; it was an announcement as well as an anticipation of what the journal was going to attempt, and was ultimately to accomplish.

The principal contributor to the *Arya* was Sri Aurobindo, and without him, the *Arya* would have been an even completer blank than Hamlet with the Prince of Denmark left out. But in the early issues, Paul Richard's *Eternal Wisdom* and *The Wherefore of the Worlds* also appeared serially, while Mirra did most of the translations for the *Revue*. When war came, Paul was called for military service, and the Richards had to leave for France, and so the *Revue* ceased publication after its seventh issue. The *Arya* however, was kept alive by Sri Aurobindo till January 1921 — alive till then, and now immortal.

The place of honour in the *Arya* was given to Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*, since his basic preoccupation at the time was to lay amply and securely the philosophical foundations of the problem of establishing the integral divine harmony within, and as its result "a changed earth and a nobler and happier humanity". Next in importance was *The Synthesis of Yoga*, a detailed exposition of the classical Yogas and of the integral Yoga that was to include and exceed them all; and *The Secret of the Veda*, a new and original inter-

³⁵ *Arya*, Vol II; reprinted in *Ideals and Progress* (1951), p. 68.

pretation of the esoteric truths concealed in the Vedic universe of symbols that earlier commentators had missed altogether. *The Life Divine* was to be the "thought of the future", *The Secret of the Veda* was to link the thought of the future with the "best and most vital thought of the past", and *The Synthesis of Yoga* was to show how this seminal new thought was progressively to be translated into present and future reality. *Essays on the Gita*, another series like *The Secret of the Veda*, was started in August 1916; and the complementary sequences — *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Psychology of Social Development* (now known as 'The Human Cycle') — began appearing from September 1915 and August 1916 respectively. Even what first commenced as a mere book-review sometimes spanned out into a treatise on the instalment plan: for example, *The Future Poetry*, *Heraclitus* and *A Defence of Indian Culture*. Among the shorter works that first appeared in the journal were *Ideals and Progress*, *The Superman*, *Evolution*, *The Renaissance in India*, *War and Self-Determination*, and the commentaries on the Isha and Kena Upanishads. Translations, reviews, aphorisms and epigrams, miscellaneous essays, comments on the progress of the war or on the prospects of perpetual peace, discussions on materialism, meditation, astrology and the universal consciousness, discourses on the reincarnating soul and the ascending unity, notices of books and journals, appreciative notes on poetry and art — these too were scattered in princely profusion in the garden of the *Arya*. Even as a business proposition, the *Arya* — notwithstanding its steady refusal to make easy concessions to its readers — seems to have paid its way, and left a small surplus besides!

In the early months of the *Arya's* existence, Mirra Richard was the chief executive, though the office was in Sri Aurobindo's house in Rue François Martin, with Saurin in charge. Later, Saurin also ran the "Aryan Stores", with financial help and advice from Mirra. Aside from the *Arya* venture, she brought together a few young men (including those living with Sri Aurobindo) and formed the society called L'Idée Nouvelle ("The New Idea"). The period of her first stay in Pondicherry — 29 March 1914 to 22 February 1915 — was thus a time of great new beginnings, and of new ties that were destined to endure. Some of the young men, Nolini, Moni and Saurin, paid a visit to Bengal early in 1914, but on the war breaking out, they returned to Pondicherry in September. When Bejoy too wished to pay a brief visit to Bengal, he was arrested at the border near Pondicherry as an ex-revolutionary and kept in jail for the duration of the war. Another inmate of Sri Aurobindo's house, the Tamil writer "Va Ra", also left Pondicherry in the course of 1914. Younger than all these, Amrita (Aravamudachari) who was yet a schoolboy came under Sri Aurobindo's spell and had his first darshan on 15 August 1913 in the Mission Street house. After Bharati, V.V.S. Aiyar and Srinivasachariar had left having received Sri Aurobindo's birthday blessings, Amrita was called in to make his obeisance. Recalling the event, Amrita wrote many years later:

Sri Aurobindo's eyes, it seemed, burned brighter than the lamplight for me; as he looked at me, in a trice all gloom vanished from within me, and his image was as it were installed in the *sanctum sanctorum* of my being.... I felt within me that he

had accepted me.³⁶

Another time when he had darshan and received Sri Aurobindo's touch, Amrita burst into sobs:

Whether I walked to him or took a leap to him, I do not know. What I remember is that a lamp was lit everywhere in me and I saw in a spontaneous and automatic movement in front of me an intense celestial beauty. My being unknowingly swam, as it were, in a sea of silence.... Bhakti is a divine acquisition, a thing of wonder; it cannot have its birth without divine grace.... Immeasurable wonder drowned me....³⁷

He was drawn more and more into that enchanted inner circle, he read *Yogic Sadhan* with Mirra (who seemed in his eyes "an image of immeasurable power"), and on reading 'The Life Divine' in the first issue of the *Arya* he felt transported although he couldn't understand it: "It was as if someone else in me was comprehending all that was read".³⁸ Having surprised Amrita in the act of reading aloud, Sri Aurobindo gently assured him: "It is not necessary to understand it all at once. Go on reading. If you find a joy in reading, you need not stop it".

Its coming into existence having synchronised with the commencement of the world war, the feat of keeping itself alive was surely no mean achievement for the *Arya* and was also the work of Grace. Acknowledging this, Sri Aurobindo wrote in its twelfth issue (July 1915):

Without the divine Will... no human work can come to the completion hoped for by our limited

³⁶ Nolini Kanta Gupta and K. Amrita, *Reminiscences*, p. 159.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 171. ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 183.

vision. To that Will we entrust the continuance and the result of our labours, and we conclude the first year of the *Arya* with the aspiration that the second may see the speedy and fortunate issue of the world-convulsion which still pursues us, and that by the Power which brings always the greatest possible good out of apparent evil there may emerge from the disastrous but long-foreseen collapse of the old order a new and better marked by the triumph of the higher principles of love, wisdom and unity and a sensible advance of the race towards our ultimate goal, — the conscious oneness of the Soul in humanity and the divinity of man.

This was but a solemn recapitulation and reiteration of the views expressed by Sri Aurobindo in the course of the interview he gave to a correspondent of the *Hindu* and published in that paper early in 1915. Sri Aurobindo had said then that Christmas-time conferences and congresses couldn't be expected to solve India's (or the world's) problems:

The old, petty forms and little, narrow, make-believe activities are getting out of date. The world is changing rapidly around us and preparing for more colossal changes in the future.... No, it is not in any of the old formal activities, but deeper down that I find signs of progress and hope.

A nation of 300 millions, a meeting-place in the past of great civilisations, a vast country full of rich material and unused capacities, should give up acting like "the inhabitants of an obscure and petty village". India had to go beyond the cribbing movements of little family ties and constant exercises in money-making, and march out into the broad life of the world. The time had come

when India had to outgrow its earlier total preoccupation with national politics:

The new idea that should now lead us is the realisation of our nationhood, not separate from, but in the future scheme of humanity.... Not a spirit of aloofness or of jealous self-defence, but of generous emulation and brotherhood with all men and all nations, justified by a sense of conscious strength, a great destiny, a large place in the human future — this should be the Indian spirit.

If the Vedantic idea of the oneness of all men in God could be realised inwardly and outwardly — “increasingly even in social relations and the structure of society” — that surely must ensure the progress of the human race. In that respect, India if she chose could “guide the world”; but for this it was necessary that the spiritual life of India should issue out of the cave and the temple, adapt itself to new forms, and “lay its hand upon the world”.³⁹

IV

The tasks connected with the *Arya* — maintaining the subscribers' list, keeping accounts, helping Paul with the *Revue* — occupied much of Mirra Richard's time. All her past occult knowledge, her intellectual and artistic accomplishments, her spiritual aspirations and realisations

³⁹ Reproduced from *Bulletin* (XXII. 3, August 1970), pp. 144-8. In the January 1967 issue of *Mother India*, however, the views are given on p. 7 as “A Message from the Past to the Future: What Sri Aurobindo said to Lala Lajpat Rai in early 1915”. This was immediately after the Madras Congress of December 1914. Lajpat Rai had been proposed for the Presidency, but the Reception Committee had played safe and chosen instead Bhupendranath Basu, the Moderate leader.

— were nothing. She had made an unreserved and total self-surrender to Sri Aurobindo on 29 March 1914 as to the Supreme, a divine humility was now the badge of her puissant renewal, and she had won back the sovereign simplicity of a “naked new-born babe”. The splendour of this total *ātma-samarpaṇa* may be seen thus imaged in the Mother’s celebrated ‘Radha’s Prayer’:

O Thou whom at first sight I knew for the Lord of my being and my God, receive my offering.

Thine are all my thoughts, all my emotions, all the movements of my life, each cell of my body, each drop of my blood. I am absolutely and altogether Thine, Thine without reserve. What Thou wilt of me, that I shall be. Whether Thou choosest for me life or death, happiness or sorrow, pleasure or suffering, all that comes to me from Thee will be welcome. Each one of Thy gifts will be always for me a gift divine bringing with it the supreme Felicity.

She began taking lessons in Sanskrit and Bengali from Sri Aurobindo, and in her turn she gave lavishly of her understanding affection to the small groups of students from the Calvé College who came to see her from time to time. Every evening she met Sri Aurobindo with Paul and they had stimulating discussions; and every Sunday, Sri Aurobindo and his young men had dinner at the Richards’ place in Rue Dupleix.

In the meantime, the war in Europe was going on with undiminished fury, and it was clear she would have to return to France. On 17 January 1915, she made this entry in her spiritual Diary:

...things have changed.... Thou hast willed that from a passive and contemplative, I become an ac-

tive and realising servant; Thou hast willed that the joyous acceptance be transformed into a joyful combat.... In a combat partial and limited, but representative of the great terrestrial struggle, Thou art putting to the test my power, decision and courage....⁴⁰

Her birthday on 21 February was celebrated by the *Arya* group of friends and fellow-seekers, and on 22 February she left for France. On 3 March, on board the *Kamo Maru*, she wrote in her Diary:

...this strong impression of having been flung into an inferno of darkness! Never at any moment of my life, in any circumstances, have I felt myself living in surroundings so entirely opposite to all that I am conscious of as true, so contrary to all that is the essence of my life....⁴¹

The next entry (4 March) too breathes the same poignancy of regret at her having to tear herself away from her new-found peace and felicity:

Each turn of the helix upon the deep ocean appears to carry me farther from my true destiny, from that which best expresses the Divine Will; each hour that passes seems to plunge me back more and more into that past with which I had severed connection....⁴²

And three days later: "It is an exile from all spiritual happiness, and of all ordeals, O Lord, this is certainly the most painful that Thou canst impose".⁴³ And yet there could be no retreat:

Thou hast forbidden and still and always forbiddest: no flight out of the world; the burden of

⁴⁰ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 222.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 225. ⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 226-7. ⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 228.

darkness and ugliness must be borne to the end....
I must remain in the heart of the night and walk
on....⁴⁴

Arrived at Lunel, she fell ill, seriously ill, and was narrowly saved from death, but she saw that the spiritual power was still fully active in her; from behind the scenes, she found it possible to exert an occult influence on men and events.⁴⁵ There was now some correspondence between her and Sri Aurobindo, generally touching upon their common spiritual quest and role — the inevitable struggles and vicissitudes — and the hope or certainty of ultimate victory. Perhaps there was some suggestion that Sri Aurobindo should pursue his Yoga in a place less exposed to the peril of politics and publicity than Pondicherry; Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal, did in fact send out a feeler through Krishna Kumar Mitra in 1915 inquiring whether Sri Aurobindo would like the ban on him to be removed to facilitate his return to India and settling down in a quiet place like Darjeeling.⁴⁶ But he knew they were idle moves and childish baits, and in any case there was no question of his moving out of Pondicherry; and so he wrote to Mirra on 6 May 1915:

The whole earth is now under one law and answers to the same vibrations, and I am sceptical of finding any place where the clash of the struggle will not pursue us. In any case, an effective retirement does not seem to be my destiny. I must remain in touch with the world until I have either mastered adverse circumstances or succumbed or carried on the struggle between the spiritual and

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 229. ⁴⁵ *Mother India*, September 1961, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Sisir Kumar Mitra, *The Liberator* (Jaico Edition), pp. 153-4.

physical so far as I am destined to carry it on.... One needs to have a calm heart, a settled will, entire self-abnegation and the eyes constantly fixed on the beyond to live undiscouraged in times like these which are truly a period of universal decomposition. For myself, I follow the Voice.... The result is not mine and hardly at all now even the labour....⁴⁷

He wrote again on 20 May:

Heaven we have possessed, but not the earth; but the fullness of the Yoga is to make, in the formula of the Veda, "Heaven and Earth equal and one". There is a clear echo of this challenging thought in her Diary entry of 31 July written at Marsillargues:

The heavens have been definitively conquered, and nothing and nobody has the power to take them from me. But the conquest of the earth has yet to be made; it is going on in the very heart of the turmoil....

Thou hast said that the earth would die, and it will die due to its old ignorance.

Thou hast said that the earth would live, and it will live in the renewal of Thy Power.⁴⁸

On 28 July, Sri Aurobindo wrote again, drawing a parallel between the spiritual struggle within and the world conflict without:

Everything internal is ripe or ripening, but there is a sort of locked struggle in which neither side can make a very appreciable advance (somewhat like the trench warfare in Europe), the spiritual

⁴⁷ This and the other quotations from the correspondence are taken from Purani's *Life of Sri Aurobindo* (2nd edition), pp. 186ff.

⁴⁸ *Prayers and Meditations*, pp. 236-7.

force insisting against the resistance disputing every inch and making more or less effective counter-attacks.... And if there were not the strength and Ananda, it would be harrassing and disgusting work; but the eye of knowledge looks beyond and sees that it is only a protracted episode.

Again, on 16 September 1915:

It is a singular condition of the world, the very definition of chaos with the superficial form of the old world resting apparently intact on the surface. But a chaos of long disintegration or of some early new birth? It is the thing yet without any approach to a decision.

On 26 November, she wrote to Sri Aurobindo, describing an experience she had had one evening in a garden-house in Paris. She had then become completely identified with the earth consciousness:

The entire consciousness immersed in divine contemplation.... And the consciousness knew that its global body was thus moving in the arms of the universal Personality, and it gave itself, it abandoned itself to Her in an ecstasy of peaceful bliss. Then it felt that its body was absorbed in the body of the universe and one with it; the consciousness became the consciousness of the universe, in its totality immobile, in its internal complexity moving infinitely....⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 241. Speaking about this experience later, the Mother said on 8 October 1947 (as recorded by Purani): "In this experience the mind did not participate.... It was an *atelier*, a pavilion with a big garden. The time was evening.... I became completely identified with the earth consciousness. Sri Aurobindo explained this experience as a very high one because the consciousness came back to the body directly — that is, to the individual being".

Commenting on this experience, Sri Aurobindo wrote in his letter of 31 December 1915:

The experience you have described is Vedic in the real sense, though not one which would easily be recognised by the modern systems of Yoga.... It is the union of the 'Earth' of the Veda and Purana with the divine Principle, an earth which is said to be above our earth, that is to say, the physical being and consciousness of which the world and the body are only images. But the modern Yogas hardly recognise the possibility of a material union with the Divine.

In spiritual life — even more, perhaps, than in our everyday external life — progress is seldom a steep straight line, but a zig-zagging, a spiralling, an alternation of forced marches and sudden setbacks, followed by fresh leaps forward. And this uncertainty, this unpredictability, this continual siege of contrarities, must be all the more exasperating with an "integral Yoga" that aims at a many-faceted and total change and transformation of oneself and one's surroundings and the whole earth itself. Early in 1916, the Richards left France for Japan, and on Mirra writing about some of the difficulties in her sadhana, Sri Aurobindo replied on 26 June with one of the most detailed and practical expositions of this self-transforming and world-transforming Yoga. Spiritual progress always runs the risk of disturbances from adverse forces. "for the complete victory of a single one of us would mean a general downfall among them". The remedy is to try to come "into a more and more universal communion with the Highest". On the other hand, even setbacks may have their uses, for when the recovery is made at last, it is with fresh spiritual gains. Nothing is

therefore gained by feeling dissatisfied or impatient. The basic requirements of the sadhana are "an absolute equality of the mind and heart and a clear purity and calm strength in all the members of the being" so that one may be able progressively to perceive the One behind the bewildering multiplicity of the phenomenal world. This experience of Unity and of pure joy in that experience must be the ground of the sadhana:

When the Unity has been well founded, the static half of our work is done, but the active half remains. It is then that in the One we must see the Master and His Power, — Krishna and Kali as I name them using the terms of our Indian religions: the Power occupying the whole of myself and my nature which becomes Kali and ceases to be anything else, the Master using, directing, enjoying the Power to his ends, not mine, with that which I call myself only as a centre of his universal existence and responding to its working as a soul to the Soul, taking upon itself his image until there is nothing left but Krishna and Kali. This is the stage I have reached in spite of all setbacks and recoils.

This is a remarkable analysis and a momentous confession. From cosmic consciousness or the consciousness of Unity (which, although it may be all right for personal felicity, will be "an escape instead of a victory"), the next stage would be to see the Unity as a creative duality of Two-in-One: Pure Existence and Power of Consciousness, or Krishna and Kali. The true Yogi turns himself into a pure engine of Power, to be used for His purposes by Krishna. What, then, happens to the individual self? In itself it is nothing; the more the Yogi becomes a powerhouse of the Supreme and a centre of the universal

Existence, the more his ego dwindles into zero. But there are further horizons still: the power-house has to be charged with Divine Knowledge and there has to be "the full opening up of the different planes... and the subjection of Matter and the body and the material world to the law of the higher heavens of the Truth". The ultimate aim, of course, was to "possess securely the Light and the Force of the Supramental being", but progress was hampered by the gheraoing old habits of intellectual thought. But it was only a question of time, Sri Aurobindo concluded; the siege would "diminish in force and be finally dispelled". Such was the calm assurance he gave to the First of his disciples, the great Collaborator who was to become the marvellous executrix, the Shakti, the Kali, the Mother of Sri Aurobindo's supramental Yoga.

V

The grounding on Unity, the turning of the whole being into an engine of Power to serve the ends of Purusha or Krishna, the mere ego being now eliminated: a progressive heightening of the power of consciousness through the influx of the higher knowledges till the mental becomes the Supramental Truth-Consciousness, the grand lever of change and transformation — such was the strategy of the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. This was the real "work" on which he was engaged, but to the outside world he was the editor of the *Arya*, the friend, comrade, teacher, chief and Guru of the small group of young men who lived with him in the Rue François Martin house or who daily sought his company and stimulating discussion with him in the evenings. He read the *Hindu* in the

mornings, met special visitors before lunch, wrote or typed out his articles for the *Arya* whenever he could find time, received Bharati, Srinivasachariar and V. V. S. Aiyar in the evenings, and had dinner usually at nine.⁵⁰ He seldom moved out of his house, but on special occasions — a marriage or baptism in a friend's house, the opening of the "Aryan Stores" — he made a brief outing. On a request from C.R. Das, Sri Aurobindo translated his *Sagar-Sangit* into English verse as *Songs of the Sea* and received Rs. 1000 for the service, an amount that was welcome in his "impecunious" condition. His Baroda friend, Khasirao Jadhav, paid a visit in 1916. Notable among the others who were received by him were V. Chandrasekharam and A.B. Purani; they first came in 1918, and in course of time became sadhaks of his Yoga and interpreters of his philosophy. But meeting people, paying visits, even writing articles or rendering Bengali into English were no more than surface activities, like ripples or foam: they didn't really interfere with the profound "sea-change" going on in the depths.

But although Sri Aurobindo had eschewed political action, he continued to follow the course of events in

⁵⁰ When Bharati, Aiyar and Srinivasachari met Sri Aurobindo in the evenings, there would be no sense of time, for talk was free. "In Bharati's speech there was the aggressiveness of the smell of jasmine. Sri Aurobindo's had the beauty of the full-blown lotus. In the talk of both, new ideas and images appeared like dazzling fireworks. It was as though Bharati had caught the words as they flew in the sky; it was as if Sri Aurobindo had scoured earth's buried treasures and brought them to our gaze. And the speech of both was equally flavoured with poetry, and both could laugh without reservation" (Va Ra in *Mahakavi Bharatiyar*, p. 8). "In the Bharati-Aurobindo conversations, all the nine rasas had full play. Poetry, history, philosophy, experience, fiction, humour, wit, repartee, exhilaration, all will continually dance in their conversations" (ibid., p. 40).

India and the world. It was not as though, "as most people supposed, that he had retired into some height of spiritual experience devoid of any further interest in the world or in the fate of India": and as he has explained later:

It could not mean that, for the very principle of his Yoga was not only to realise the Divine and attain to a complete spiritual consciousness, but also to take all life and all world activity into the scope of this spiritual consciousness and action and to base life on the Spirit and give it a spiritual meaning. In his retirement Sri Aurobindo kept a close watch on all that was happening in the world and in India and actively intervened whenever necessary, but solely with a spiritual force and silent spiritual action....⁵¹

When B. Shiva Rao, then on the staff of the *New India* edited by Annie Besant, visited Sri Aurobindo in 1917, he freely discussed the 'Home Rule' movement, the situation created by the internment of Arundale, B. P. Wadia and Mrs. Besant herself, and the new upsurge in the country. Recalling the interview over forty years later, Shiva Rao wrote:

...there was an atmosphere of great peace and serenity about him which left on me a deep, enduring impression. He spoke softly, almost in whispers. He thought Mrs. Besant was absolutely right in preaching Home Rule for India, as well as in her unqualified support of the Allies in the first world war against Germany.⁵²

Later, on Annie Besant's particular request, Sri Aurobindo wrote an article for her paper on the Mon-

⁵¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 68. ⁵² *The Hindu*, 10 May 1959.

tagu-Chelmsford Reforms as from "an Indian Nationalist", and described the scheme as a Chinese puzzle.

From the vantage ground of Yogic strength and aloofness, Sri Aurobindo surveyed the developing world situation too with the steady wisdom of a Seer. The life of the *Arya* was almost exactly contemporaneous with the course of the first world war and its aftermath, and no wonder the War and the Peace were the subjects of some of Sri Aurobindo's most trenchant and most prophetic utterances. When, after four terribly sanguinary years of total warfare, the Armistice was signed at last, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Arya* in December 1918 under the heading "At the End of the War":

It is the wrath of Rudra that has swept over the earth and the track of his footprints can be seen in these ruins. There has come as a result upon the race the sense of having lived in many falsehoods and the need of building according to an ideal. Therefore we have now to meet the question of the Master of Truth. Two great words of the divine Truth have forced themselves insistently on our minds through the crash of the ruin and the breath of the tempest and are now the leading words of the hoped-for reconstruction — freedom and unity.⁵³

The world was tired of total warfare, of any warfare, and men wanted the reign of peace, of perpetual peace; but there were insuperable obstacles on the way to the realisation of the ideal of human brotherhood. Without freedom — freedom for individual man and also for each nationality — healthy self-expression would be impossible; but without order and unity — a sense of self-discipline in individual man and in the corporate life of

⁵³ *Arya*, Vol. V, p. 299.

the nation — harmony would again be impossible. Freedom and Unity were indeed the two poles of our Existence. But we had to learn to preserve the delicate but necessary balance between them. Else we would be lured to one or the other with a fatal completeness, and thereby we would be destroying ourselves, either by indulging in an excess of freedom and enacting anarchy or by succumbing to the death-trap of total collectivism.

This was the crux of the problem for the "Big Four" of the Peace Conference at Versailles; but none of them — not even the idealistic President Woodrow Wilson — could effectively rise to the occasion. They were tired old men, either without vision or without vitality; and the world watched and waited — "humped in silence" — for the results of the Peace Conference. Sri Aurobindo, however, read the signs correctly and wrote on "1919", the fateful year of the Carthaginian Peace, in the July issue of the *Arya*:

This year too may be only the end of an acute phase of a first struggle, the commencement of a breathing time, the year of a makeshift, the temporary halt of a flood in motion. That is so because it has not realised the deeper mind of humanity nor answered to the far-reaching intention of the Time-Spirit.⁵⁴

The "Big" Powers were but manoeuvring for position in the post-War world. The imposition of "reparations" on prostrate Germany was, as John Maynard Keynes was fast realising, a stupid business; the scramble for her former colonies was most unedifying; the inability of the major Allied Powers to achieve unanimity of opinion on the momentous issues of the day was truly portentous.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 765-6.

The Allies might have won the War, but they were certainly fast losing the Peace!

Moreover, for all the talk of "making the world safe for democracy" or making it a "place fit for heroes to live in", the War had not been fought on a clear-cut moral issue. It had been but "a very confused clash and catastrophe of the inter-tangled powers of the past, present and future. The result actually achieved... is not the last result nor the end of the whole matter, but it represents the first sum of things that was ready for working out in the immediateness of the moment's potency. More was involved which will now press for its reign, but belongs to the future".⁵⁵ In regard, then, to the central human problem of achieving a concord between the two poles of Freedom and Unity (or Security) on a world basis, World War I was almost worse than useless; one more chapter in the annals of human history had concluded — but all had yet to be begun, for the human spirit had "still to find itself, its idea and its greater orientation".⁵⁶

Indeed, Sri Aurobindo's worst fears had come true; and so a year later he wrote again in the *Arya* under the caption "After the War":

The war that was fought to end war has been only the parent of fresh armed conflict and civil discord, and it is the exhaustion that followed it which alone prevents as yet another vast and sanguinary struggle. The new fair and peaceful world order that was promised us has gone far away into the land of chimeras. The League of Nations that was to have embodied it hardly even exists, or exists only as a mockery and a byword. It is an orna-

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 767. ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 768.

mental, a quite helpless and otiose appendage to the Supreme Council, at present only a lank promise dangled before the vague and futile idealism of those who are still faithful to its sterile formula, a League on paper and with little chance, even if it becomes more apparently active, of being anything more than a transparent cover or a passive support for the domination of the earth by a close oligarchy of powerful governments or, it may seem, of two allied and imperialistic nations.⁵⁷

This prophecy, uttered on his forty-eighth birthday (15 August 1920), was to unfold its tragic implications in the terrible miscalculations and mighty upheavals and disasters of the next half-century.

For six years and a half, the *Arya* gave its readers and the world at large the very munificence of Sri Aurobindo's thought in the several realms of knowledge: philosophy, literature, Yoga, scriptural exegesis, art and literary criticism, history and sociology, national and international politics. Paul Richard's collections of extracts from the world's outstanding thinkers, grouped suggestively under various headings, must also have appealed to many readers of the *Arya*; the wise men and women of all ages and climes figured in these anthologies and often reinforced, by implication, the more studied and systematic expositions in Sri Aurobindo's majestic sequences and multitudinous other contributions, which were verily the products of "a God's labour". What he had accomplished was little less than a digging into the depths of consciousness, a daring of the highest heights, a linking and a teaming of the extremities, a raising up or bringing down to the earth of the strength of matter, the throb of life.

⁵⁷ *Arya*, Vol. VII, p. 28.

the thrill of mind and the light of the Spirit, charging the WORD with POWER and turning Vision into unfolding Reality: a manifold as well as a unified Revelation. Well might he have said, on the completion of the *Arya*:

I have delved through the dumb Earth's dreadful heart
And heard her black mass' bell.

I have seen the source whence her agonies part
And the inner reason of hell...

On a desperate stair my feet have trod
Armoured with boundless peace,
Bringing the fires of the splendour of God
Into the human abyss...

A little more and the new life's doors
Shall be carved in silver light
With its aureate roof and mosaic floors
In a great world bare and bright.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *Poems Past and Present*, pp. 8-10.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE SUPRAMENTAL MANIFESTO

I

Month after month, Sri Aurobindo gave the place of honour in the *Arya* to *The Life Divine* sequence, a mighty unfoldment of his vision of the future evolution of Man. Long after the *Arya* had suspended publication, Sri Aurobindo took up the revision of the series of articles, made substantial additions, and published *The Life Divine* in book form, the first volume in 1939 and the more sumptuous second in 1940. The one-volume American edition (with an Index) came out in 1949, and the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education edition (also in one volume of 1272 pages) followed in 1955. A definitive edition in two volumes has since appeared in 1970 in the Centenary Edition. Along with *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *Savitri*, the epic of later years, *The Life Divine* constitutes a triple glory in the Sri Aurobindo canon. It is basically a treatise on metaphysics, but it is also a work of prose art and a manifesto for the Future. Of almost forbidding bulk, yet the very title 'The Life Divine' fascinates at once, and the power of this fascination never palls.

It is true metaphysical speculations often prove to be arid and inconclusive, offering no key to current perplexity, no clue to get out of our "existential predicament". Milton describes how some of the fallen angels

...apart sat on a hill retired,

In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate —
Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute.

And found no end, in wandering mazes lost.
 Of good and evil much they argued then,
 Of happiness and final misery,
 Passion and apathy, and glory and shame:
 Vain wisdom all, and false philosophy!¹

And there is also Omar Khayyam's abrupt dismissal of philosophy:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
 Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
 About it and about: but evermore
 Came out by the same Door as in I went.

It is with his mental faculty that man usually tries to pluck the heart of Reality, but he is himself in it and of it, and he finds himself baffled in his attempts to seize it in its unity and totality. Didn't Archimedes say that he could lift the world with a little lever if only he could station himself for a while elsewhere? Although a strict rational comprehension of Reality may thus have to be ruled out, knowledge through realised identity may still be possible. In the course of a letter to a disciple written in 1930, Sri Aurobindo drew a distinction between Western metaphysics and the Yoga of the Indian saints. In the West, an excessive importance has been given always to thought, intellect, the logical reason as the highest means and even as the highest end; "Thought is the be-all and the end-all" in philosophy; and even spiritual experience has been "summoned to pass the tests of the intellect" if such experience is to have any validity at all!² In India the position has been just the reverse. In the East generally, and in India purposively and continuously, while no doubt the metaphysical thinkers have

¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book II, ll. 557-65.

² *The Riddle of This World* (1943), p. 24.

tried to approach ultimate Reality through the intellect, they have assigned only a subordinate status to such mental constructions. On the other hand, "the first rank has always been given to spiritual intuition and illumination and spiritual experience".³ Without their corroboration — or, rather, unless they are made the base — mere intellectual constructions have been dismissed as no more than exercises. Further, the Indian metaphysical thinker — a Yajnavalkya, a Sankara, a Ramanuja — has almost always been a Yogi and a Rishi, one who has armed his philosophy "with a practical way of reaching to the supreme state of consciousness, so that even when one begins with Thought, the aim is to arrive at a consciousness beyond mental thinking".⁴ It is to the credit of a modern German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, that he too has come to realise the limitations of mere Reason; "thinking", he says, "only begins at the point where we have come to know that Reason, glorified for centuries, is the most obstinate adversary of thinking".⁵ Through the isolation and analytical scrutiny of detached things and phenomena, the ancient Greeks started the movement of the physical and biological sciences, and the result is the impressive edifice of modern civilisation. But this gain has also meant, according to Heidegger, the decline and fall of Being; we manufacture so-called understanding of 'things' in their minutiae (or, shall we say, of *Being* artificially atomised), yet manage to miss the meaning of the background, the Field of Being. The microscopically efficient way of Reason helps us perhaps to con every letter in the Book of Nature — or the Writ of Being —

³ *ibid.*, p. 23. ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵ *What is Philosophy?*, translated by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (1955).

and yet fail to miss the sense of the whole. It is impossible for questing Man to leap towards the Truth so long as he is content to remain locked up in the prison-house of his intellect. If, for the lower knowledge, Reason was the helper, for the higher knowledge, Reason is the bar. The true metaphysician must not only master the uses of the Intellect, he should be able to beyond them too, "self-lost in the vasts of God".⁶

The central problems of philosophy were formulated by Kant in the form of three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for? These questions carry the content of the Indian concepts of *tattva*, *hita* and *puruṣārtha*. Perhaps the simplest way of describing *The Life Divine* would be to call it Sri Aurobindo's symphonic answer to these inter-linked questions of philosophy in the steady light of his own spiritual experiences at Baroda, Alipur, Chandernagore and Pondicherry. As he explained in one of the later issues of the *Arya*:

The spiritual experience and the general truths on which such an attempt should be based were already present to us... but the complete intellectual statement of them and their results and issues had to be found. This meant a continuous thinking, a high and subtle and difficult thinking on several lines, and this strain, which we had to impose on ourselves, we are obliged to impose also on our readers.⁷

Without the river itself and the perennial supply of water from the mountain heights, there is indeed no question of harnessing the waters or organising a "multi-purpose" project; but this harnessing and organisation too

⁶ From Sri Aurobindo's poem, *Thought the Paraclete*.

⁷ *Arya*, July 1918.

are important, and call for "high and subtle and difficult" cerebrations and technologies. Sri Aurobindo mentions "several lines" of thinking, although all start from a central "spiritual experience", a core of apprehended "general truths". One line of inquiry — indeed, the life-line of the Aurobindonian world-view — became *The Life Divine*. But there were subsidiary or collateral lines of inquiry as well, and these duly spanned out into undulations of illuminating interpretation and comment. We have thus the several *Arya* sequences comprising Yoga, sociology, politics, exegesis, cultural history, creative criticism and sheer prophecy. So many pathways, so many horizons; so many stairways of knowledge, so many universes of discourse: how are we to pluck the courage to approach this overawing phenomenon?

Yet all great ideas, all heady leaps of thought, all audacious adventures in the ambience of Consciousness are fundamentally so simple that a child should be able to take them in and experience a surge of pure joy. There must lie behind the manifoldness and complexity of the Aurobindonian revelation a basic unity and a synoptic centre — a nuclear and nectarean core. What is it, then? In brief, Sri Aurobindo felt that it was possible for man to advance yet farther in the evolutionary race and reach a new dynamic status, that of the Superman. But a kind of road-block was barring the way. If that could be removed — and it could and indeed would be — the transitional being, the mental man, would give place to the future man, the supramental man; and when man changed, society and its institutions and its activities would change too, and the Life Divine would be established here on the earth.

A "Life Divine" *here* — "upon *this* bank and shoal of

time"! — isn't this too fantastically good to prove ever true? Like a mirage it has so often teased and deceived us. Like the horizon it has lured us from afar and, at our approach, it has disconcertingly receded into the distance. It is Aldous Huxley who writes thus wistfully, speaking for himself and millions like him:

The earthly paradise, the earthly paradise! With what longing, between the bars of my temperament, do I peer at its bright landscape, how voluptuously sniff at its perfumes of hay and raspberries, of honeysuckle and roast duck, of sun-warmed flesh and nectarines of the sea! But the bars are solid; the earthly paradise is always on the further side. Self-hindered, I cannot enter and make myself at home.... The mind is its own place, and its tendency is always to see heaven in some other place.⁸

But some chosen few, in ancient no less than in modern times, have resisted the notion that heaven must necessarily be in another place, not here on the earth. The assurance was given, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within you". And sundry poets have affirmed:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God...⁹

The world is charged with the grandeur of God...¹⁰

...see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour...¹¹

Texts and Pretexts (Phoenix Edition), p. 75.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning. ¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins.

¹¹ William Blake.

These are random guesses or bold affirmations, possible only to those auspiciously born, but unintelligible to the purblind mass of humanity. The Aurobindonian world-view is, however, based on a more radical — more revolutionary — spiritual experience; it is not merely the inference of the inherency of the Divine in our terrestrial and temporal existence, but rather the participation in the emergence, the explosion, of the Divine in our life, and consequently in the transformation of man and earth-nature into Superman and supernature. Sri Aurobindo was not a professional or academic philosopher, he was a Yogi who happened to take philosophy also in his stride. He was not a hard-headed “intellectual”, he was a *sthitaprajna* who wielded the intellect with the unlaboured and unconscious assurance of a Master. His was no half-light arrested and obscured by the barrier Mind, but the complete Ray piercing the golden lid and illuminating the face of Truth. Once Sri Aurobindo had won his way to the fount and silent tarn of creative experience, *The Life Divine* and his other works were merely the channelling of the living waters to the divers contiguous territories of knowledge. As K. D. Sethna once wrote to a Western correspondent:

His (Sri Aurobindo's) is not an integral philosophy for the sake of philosophy, his is an integral Yoga, and all his philosophising is a statement in mental terms of what he has realised. *The Life Divine* is nothing except his experience, his realisation. Having attained in constant waking life, and not merely in a sealed samadhi, the reality which he terms Gnosis, he has but laid out in intellectual exposition what the gnostic consciousness is and what Yogic possibilities it holds and what the results of its full descent

into our earth-existence will be.... There is a mighty intellect in *The Life Divine* which we at once feel to be no whit less than Plato's or Spinoza's or Hegel's, but none of these giants was a full-fledged Yogi. Sri Aurobindo's intellect is an instrument used by a spiritual realisation: not one sentence anywhere is inspired by the intellect alone.¹²

Spiritual activity is essentially a harmonising, unitive and blissfully creative experience: intellectual activity is an analytical and differentiative process, though it could also be directed to the tasks of integration and architecture. It is the supreme union of spiritual experience and intellectual activity in *The Life Divine* that makes it a superb declaration for the future, a sublime announcement of the coming greater Dawn, and a unique "supramental" manifesto of the now evolving Gnostic Age of supermen and supernature.

II

Even a first look, a sweeping glance, at the rich outline and majestic contours of *The Life Divine* must make one exclaim how greatly it is all planned, with what consummate sureness it has been completed. There are two

¹² *Mother India*, August 1966, pp. 66-7. In the course of a conversation about the book, Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said on 20 February 1940: "What I have tried to give in the book is a metaphysical foundation of Yoga and a new way of life. Any book of philosophy has to be metaphysical...it is not the language but the thought-substance that may be difficult to follow. If I had written about the Congress in the same language, then you would have understood" (Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Part II, pp. 197-8). What is important in *The Life Divine* is not so much the intellectual framework, awe-inspiring though it is,

volumes, each of twenty-eight chapters; but the second volume is nearly three times as expansive as the first, and is itself divided into two parts, each of fourteen chapters:

Volume One: 'Omnipresent Reality and the Universe'

Volume Two: 'The Knowledge and the Ignorance —
The Spiritual Evolution'

Part One: 'The Infinite Consciousness and the
Ignorance'

Part Two: 'The Knowledge and the Spiritual
Evolution'

From an inquiry into the place of "man-as-he-is" in the universe, the argument proceeds to a discussion of the 'how': "How did the movement from the knowledge Divine to the ignorance (*avidya*) of mental man take place?"; and this, again, is followed (in Vol. II, Part 2) by the climactic inquiry: "How, then, shall avidya-ridden man surpass his ignorance (and the impotence born of it) and reclaim the sovereignty of the Divine knowledge or Gnosis or "supramental Truth-Consciousness"? Mental man is a transitional being in the evolving history of the earth. He has behind him the geological and prehistoric ages of inanimate or animal existence; but ahead of him lie the plenitudes and puissances of the Life Divine.

The first volume opens magnificently: it is a key beginning as in music, and sets the tone of high seriousness to the entire work:

The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened

but rather the nectarean thought-substance or spiritual content. Thus, as Jesse Roarke puts it, Sri Aurobindo "can be called a philosopher — loosely — only if the term is taken in its largest sense — a 'love of wisdom' that is an attempt to Know, to enlarge one's whole nature in Truth ... He deals, not in 'concepts' and provisional formulations, but in realities" (*The Advent*, September 1972, p. 10).

thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation, — for it survives the longest periods of scepticism and returns after every banishment, — is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality. The ancient dawns of human knowledge have left us their witness to this constant aspiration; today we see a humanity satiated but not satisfied by victorious analysis of the externalities of Nature preparing to return to its primeval longings. The earliest formula of Wisdom promises to be its last, — God, Light, Freedom, Immortality.¹³

Man restlessly seeks happiness, harmony, fulfilment, felicity — call it what you will, he has sought it unavailingly down the endless march of the years, or he has found it only to lose it soon after. Human sensibility has been quick to register the “still sad music of humanity”, to record the cries that moan the frustrations and manifold hurts of life, the whimpers that reiterate the melancholy truth “Sorrow Is”. Power corrupts, knowledge confounds, friendship fails, love degenerates — and life, life, what is it but a thing of nought?

In this predicament, one might either deny the soul's thirst for felicity or life's hunger for the earth. A Papa Karamazov might take the line: Life, life, I'll make no impossible demands on it; life's worth living so long as there's an ounce of vodka or a single woman in the world; let me drink life to the lees! His son, Ivan the intellectual, might call it an “insect's life”, but the

¹³ *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1960), pp. 1-2.

hardened old sinner reck not. Materialism, of course, needn't degenerate into Karamazovism or mere hedonism, but even at its best it is a one-sided view of life that denies both the nourishment of the Spirit and the hope of tomorrow. On the other hand, the stoic and the ascetic would rather reason as follows: Life is but thus and thus; misery and pain *do* constitute the badge of our lives; we are hedged on all sides by the insuperable limitations of death, desire and incapacity; and we are fated alas! to undergo

The weariness, the fever, and the fret,
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan...
 Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies...
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs;¹⁴

and hence we should learn (the only knowledge that is worth our while to learn) to minimise our demands upon life. And, after all, life is only for a brief *now* — let us, then, brave its ills with an unblenching stare, nay, let us ignore them altogether, and soon the everlasting Night will give us release from *samsāra*, the interlocked fatuity of terrestrial life; the very smell of the earth would be forgotten, and we would then and for all time taste the joys of Heaven, the utter felicity, the bliss of inapprehensible Sachchidananda! And between the two negations — the Materialist Denial and the Refusal of the Ascetic — there is the even sharper attitude of immediate rejection of life, like Hamlet's:

Who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn

¹⁴ Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*.

No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear these ills we have.

Than fly to others that we know not of...

Where — or which — is this “undiscovered country”? Heaven? Hell? Purgatory? Or is it (as Svidrigailov of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* images it to be) a mere bathroom somewhere with overhanging spiders’ webs? It is enough to “puzzle the will” and leave one stranded on the bleak rocks of bewilderment and despair.

This, then, is the human predicament. “Sorrow Is”, evil and pain are the duumvirate ruling our terrestrial existence, and there seem to be only two ways of combating, or rather of by-passing, the Enemy. One is the materialistic way of making the best of a bad business, or even revelling in its very sloth and imperfection. The other is the stoical way of patient sufferance or the ascetic way of determined ignorance of life’s limitations and tribulations. The materialist would affirm the finality of the phenomenal world, but fiercely deny the Spirit; the ascetic, on the other hand, would affirm the Spirit, but deny the reality of this sullied earth and our sensory perceptions. And yet — notwithstanding the two negations — the cry has ever gone forth from the depths of the human heart that somehow we must seek and find Heaven *here*, or found it and retain it for ever. We must not deny the Spirit, for the whole obscure current of our existence is up against the tongue’s vain denial of the omnipresent Reality. Nor must we curb the flesh and inflict on it a thousand and one injuries of commission and omission, for matter, flesh and the whole objective world are bound sooner or later to take their fearful revenge on all but the staunchest knight-errants of the Spirit. We want an all-inclusive, rather than a severely

partial, view of Reality, and we want a philosophy of affirmations rather than a series of refusals and negations.

While Sri Aurobindo repudiates both the Materialist Denial and the Refusal of the Ascetic, he readily recognises "the enormous, the indispensable utility of the very brief period of rationalistic Materialism through which humanity has been passing", as also the "still greater service rendered by Asceticism to life".¹⁵ Modern materialism, in the main a Western phenomenon, has given signal service to questing man by providing him with a considerable body of knowledge regarding the lower planes of existence, just as asceticism, in the main an Eastern and even peculiarly an Indian phenomenon, has served aspiring man by boldly adventuring into the unknown and giving him intimations of the infinitudes of the Spirit. It is also clear that neither the Western revolt of Matter against Spirit nor the Indian recoil of Spirit from Matter can yield a harmony. The materialist's Denial is one version of Reality, the ascetic's Refusal is another. The problem therefore is to reconcile the two in a larger and truer synthesis. A hint of such a synthesis is inset in one of Sri Aurobindo's jewelled aphorisms:

Life, Life, Life, I hear the passions cry; God,
God, God, is the soul's answer. Unless thou seest
and lovest Life as God only, then is Life itself a
sealed joy to thee.¹⁶

Life is not divorced from God, and God is never aloof from Life. And the supposed irreconcilables, Matter and Spirit, are not really so irreconcilable, after all; Matter links up with Life and Mind, and Spirit stretches across

¹⁵ *The Life Divine*, pp. 12, 30.

¹⁶ *Thoughts and Aphorisms* (1968), p. 115.

Sachchidananda (Existence, Conscious-Force, Bliss) towards Mind, and so Matter to Spirit is a whole arc of unity:

...the sharp division which practical experience and long habit of mind have created between Spirit and Matter has no longer any fundamental reality. The world is a differentiated unity, a manifold oneness.... An inalienable oneness generating infinite variety is its foundation and beginning; a constant reconciliation behind apparent division and struggle combining all possible disparates for vast ends in a secret Consciousness and Will which is ever one and master of all its own complex action, appears to be its real character in the middle; we must assume therefore that a fulfilment of the merging Will and Consciousness and a triumphant harmony must be its conclusion. Substance is the form of itself on which it works, and of that substance if Matter is one end, Spirit is the other. The two are one: Spirit is the soul and reality of that which we sense as Matter; Matter is a form and body of that which we realise as Spirit.¹⁷

Omnipresent Reality thus comprises both Matter and Spirit, and also the realms between. It is like a stairway, and the way up is but the reverse of the way down:

¹⁷ *The Life Divine*, pp. 287-8. Cf. Viscount Samuel: "Never do we find life produced from 'not-life'; always from something already living. And never will you get mind from 'not-mind'.... Mind and matter are coeval. From ambience and ether, both present everywhere and always, the universe is made". (*An Unknown Island*, 1944, pp. 146-7.) And Edwin Conklin the biologist says sarcastically: "The possibility of life originating from accident is comparable to the possibility of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop" (quoted in V. Madhusudan Reddy's *Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Evolution*, 1966).

...we perceive that our existence is a sort of refraction of the divine existence, in inverted order of ascent and descent, thus ranged, —

Existence	Matter
Consciousness-Force	Life
Bliss	Psyche
Supermind	Mind.

The Divine descends from pure existence through the play of Consciousness-Force and Bliss and the creative medium of Supermind into cosmic being; we ascend from Matter through a developing life, soul and mind and the illuminating medium of supermind towards the divine being. The knot of the two, the higher and the lower hemisphere, is where mind and supermind meet with a veil between them. The rending of the veil is the condition of the divine life in humanity; for by that rending, by the illuminating descent of the higher into the nature of the lower being and the forceful ascent of the lower being into the nature of the higher, mind can recover its divine light in the all-comprehending supermind, the soul realise its divine self in the all-possessing all-blissful Ananda, life repossess its divine power in the play of omnipotent Consciousness-Force and Matter open to its divine liberty as a form of the divine Existence. And if there be any goal to the evolution... such a luminous and puissant transfiguration and emergence of the Divine in the creature (man) must be that high-uplifted goal and that supreme significance.¹⁸

¹⁸ *The Life Divine*. pp. 316-7.

Of the "eight principles" from Existence to Matter arranged in an order of descent (or from Matter to Existence in an order of ascent), the three-in-one Sachchidananda is Omnipresent Reality: it is pure Existence that is both Will and Force, and above all it is *blissful* Existence. And yet it is this Sachchidananda that causes, as a result of the descent or involution, the multiplicity, the disharmony, the oceanic spectacle of suffering and frustration that we seem to witness in the world of everyday phenomena. The science of Biology has made intelligible the evolution or emergence of Life from Matter, and of Mind from Life; inanimate matter, living plant, insect, bird or animal, and rational man seem thus to be the three very distinct stages in evolution. But the human mind is unable, as a general rule, to look beyond itself; it is unable to see in the phenomenal world of the dualities a reflection or an immanence or play of manifestation of the triune self-glory of Sachchidananda. It is as though a wall separates the two halves of Reality; it is as though the transparency of the glass is obscured and darkened by a heavy coating of mercury on the other side, with the result that, as Aldous Huxley pointed out, the paradise of Sachchidananda is always "on the other side". Of the four "principles" in the lower hemisphere (*aparārdha*), we are normally aware of three: Matter (the physical body), Life (nerve-energy or *prāna*) and Mind. The fourth, Psyche, is the "double soul" in man, the superficial desire-soul of our normal experience and the quintessential psychic-soul that is a portion of the Divine Soul:

...we have a double psychic entity in us, the surface desire-soul which works in our vital cravings, our emotions, aesthetic faculty and mental seeking for power, knowledge and happiness, and a subliminal

psychic entity, a pure power of light, love, joy and refined essence of being which is our true soul...¹⁹ Like the subliminal psychic entity which is the true soul, there are also the subliminal or deeper realities of Mind, Life and Matter:

The subliminal mind in us is open to the universal knowledge of the cosmic Mind, the subliminal life in us to the universal force of the cosmic Life, the subliminal physicality in us to the universal force-formation of cosmic Matter.²⁰

There are, then, the two hemispheres, the *parārdha* of Sachchidananda and the *aparārdha* of our everyday existence which is one of egoistic isolation, ineffectiveness and misery; but from the subliminal behind the scenes fan out creepers of communication between the prison-house of egoistic individuality and the infinite freedom of cosmic universality. Nevertheless, for all practical purposes, the two hemispheres are distinct and apparently not easily bridgeable. In what amounts to this cosmic stalemate, Sri Aurobindo posits 'Supermind' as the link principle which is also a power of total transformation.

The problem may be posed thus: If Sachchidananda is indeed the Reality, what has turned it into the *aparārdha* phenomenon that we actually know? After dismissing the philosophies — the noumenal and the idealistic — which recognise the Mind alone as the creator of the worlds of appearance, Sri Aurobindo puts forward his hypothesis (born of his own spiritual experience):

The view I am presenting goes farther in idealism; it sees the creative Idea as Real-Idea, that is to say, a power of Conscious Force expressive of real being, born out of real being and partaking of its nature,

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 263. ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 264.

and neither a child of the Void nor a weaver of fictions.²¹

It is beyond the pale and flickering firmament of the Mind that true Knowledge waits "throned in the luminous vast of illimitable self-vision".²² This principle, being above or beyond the Mind, could be called Supermind, but since the term is susceptible to misunderstanding, Sri Aurobindo specifies its connotation by recalling certain Vedic intimations:

Vast all-comprehensiveness; luminous truth and harmony of being in that vastness and not a vague chaos or self-lost obscurity; truth of law and act and knowledge expressive of that harmonious truth of being.²³

The link-principle is therefore described as Truth-consciousness or even as supramental Truth-consciousness, and it operates between the unitarian and indivisible Sachchidananda above and the analytic and dividing Mind or mental activity below. This mediating Supermind is both the child of Sachchidananda and the parent of the Mind; by its poise of identity it has total comprehension, and by its power of differentiation it precipitates the processes of the Mind. Further, in Supermind there is no hiatus between knowledge and will, for Supermind is "Real-Idea" which is both knowledge and will in the Idea, for now knowledge *is* power and to think is to bring the thing itself into being. And, finally, Supermind is no elusive entity to be sought in far-off climes, but is right here all the time; "wherever Mind is, there Supermind must be",²⁴ for Supermind is involved in Mind even as Mind is involved in Life and Life is involved in Matter.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 139. ²² *ibid.*, p. 143. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 207.

Of the lower triad Mind-Life-Matter, Mind sheds its separativity and divisiveness as it sends out its creepers towards the Supermind, and so allies itself more and more with the cosmic Intelligence. But how about the other two terms, Life and Matter? At the deeper subliminal level, of course, Life and Matter too break through the bars of their isolationist cages and send out their tentacles of cosmic kinship. A little reflection and a close look at the latest discoveries of atomic physics and molecular biology make it clear that Life and Matter are inextricably involved in the cosmic play, "Life" is essentially the same everywhere, from the atom to the supercivilised man, "the atom containing the subconscious stuff and movement of being which are released into consciousness in the animal, with plant life as a mid-way stage in the evolution".²⁵ In all manifestations of life — insect, bird or animal — the tension is between the two pulls, "the necessity or the will of the separate ego to survive in its distinctness and guard its identity and the compulsion imposed upon it by Nature to fuse itself with others".²⁶ The predicament of man in this respect is no different from that of any other living creature whatsoever, for his ascent from Matter through Life to Mind has only trapped Man in the precarious imbalance of a middle state:

Plac'd on this Isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride...
In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 222.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 241.

Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err....²⁷

It may be that, on account of its blindness and perversity, the race of man is doomed to "fall by the wayside" and write "Finis" to the human adventure. It is, on the contrary, far more likely that evolutionary Man will at last extricate himself from the grip of the "middle state", achieve the release of the involved Supermind, and make the steep ascent towards the Godhead.²⁸ The snapped link with the divine source will then be restored, the obscuring veil torn asunder, the hiatus finally closed:

...the appearance of a supramental spiritual being who shall impose on his mental, vital, bodily workings a higher law than that of the dividing Mind is no longer impossible... it is the natural and inevitable conclusion of the nature of cosmic exist-

What, then, are the new ingredients in the Aurobindonian metaphysics of life-transformation and world-transformation? Firstly, the conception of the inter-linked processes of evolution-involution or ascent-descent; secondly, the principle of integration at every stage of the forward movement of consciousness; and thirdly, the identification of the sovereign creative role of the Supermind. It is, however, important to remember that words like "ascent" and "descent" — or "upward", "downward" or "inward" — have to be understood in a psychological and not a strictly physical sense, and our temporal images are but desperate attempts to convey the realities of extra-temporal processes. Unlike the orthodox scientific evolutionist, Sri Aurobindo affirms that Life cannot emerge from Matter unless it is already involved in it, for it is

²⁷ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Book II.

²⁸ *The Life Divine*, p. 259. ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 299.

not a spurt of unpredictable chance that throws up the emergent but rather a preordained event in the cosmic plan. Thus even in Matter (that heavy concentration of Inconscience, that triple knot of ignorance, inertia and inconsequence) all the higher emergents, the highest not excluded, are latent; hence the declaration in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* that "Matter is Brahman". In Sri Aurobindo's words:

Where one principle is manifest in Cosmos, there all the rest must be not merely present and passively latent, but secretly at work.³⁰

The process of evolution (or ascent) is thus a drawing out of the principles and powers that are nascent within and are eager to sprout; it is in the nature of a legitimate and inevitable self-exceeding and open manifestation. And such an effort is invariably facilitated and consummated by a corresponding act of descent from above:

In the spiritual order of things, the higher we project our view and our aspiration, the greater the Truth that seeks to descend upon us, because it is already there within us and calls for its release from the covering that conceals it in manifested Nature.³¹

Ascent thus ever goes hand in hand with descent, emergence thus always brings about integration in its wake. When Life evolved out of Matter, it did not deny or escape from Matter; it only energised Matter and made it conscious or semi-conscious in animal and plant life. When likewise Mind evolved out of Life, man the mental being did not — indeed he could not — deny either Life or Matter; he only achieved a new integration, a

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 321. ³¹ *ibid.*, p. 323.

harmony of all three, with the "psyche" as the true master of the ceremonies. This is why Sri Aurobindo views the adventure of Consciousness as a threefold movement: an upward movement—the evolution or the ascent or the emergence; a downward movement—the involution or the descent or the immersion; and an inward movement—the integration, the unification, the transformation. The next preordained evolutionary change, the Supramental, may very well prove to be the climactic upsurge that will end the "original sin" of impotent separatist egoism and make manifest a Divine Life on the earth.

III

The hope of such a divinised life on the earth, although it may seem revolutionary or merely fanciful in the present context, has nevertheless been often seriously entertained in the past, and thinkers and visionaries have glimpsed the possibility, if not always the inevitability, of the Mind successfully casting aside the insignias of its obscuration and perversion and attaining the pure Light and Puissance of the Supermind. The *Taittiriya Upanishad*, for example, sees in Man several layers of reality and significance: *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijñānamaya* and *ānandamaya* corresponding to the physical man, vital man, mental man, supramental man and the wholly realised man resting in the *saccid-ananda* consciousness. The great crossing has to be from the *aparārdha* hemisphere of the first three to the *parārdha* hemisphere of the last two; in other words, from the port of Mind to the bridgehead of Supermind or *vijñāna*. As V. Chandrasekharam has pointed out:

What the *Taittiriya* teaches is the discovery by man the mental being of *viññanamaya puruṣa* who is his self.... And the entire teaching of Sri Aurobindo is hinged on the true conception of this Upanishadic *viññāna*.... He (man) is to bring down the power of *viññāna* into his life here, and free it from evil and suffering. And to that end, he had to transform his nature from top to bottom.³²

In other and later times, too, these insights and these hopes have sustained men in their darkest moments. The materialist may have been content to make the most of what everyday life happened to offer: the religionist may have ignored present life and patiently looked forward to the life to come "on the other side": and the philosophic mystic may have sought an escape from this "world of Maya" in an immersion in Nirvana. But at all times some few have resolutely avoided all these escape-routes and fastened on the possibility of bridging the apparent gulf between "the ignorance of Nature and the light of the Spirit". As Sri Aurobindo puts it:

It is a keen sense of this possibility which has taken different shapes and persisted through the centuries, — the perfectibility of man, the perfectibility of society, the Alvar's vision of the descent of Vishnu and the Gods upon earth, the reign of the saints, *sadhunām rajyam*, the city of God, the millennium, the new heaven and earth of the Apocalypse. But these intuitions have lacked a basis of assured knowledge and the mind of man has remained swinging between a bright future hope and a grey present certitude.³³

³² *Sri Aurobindo: Three Essays* (1951), pp. 100-101.

³³ *The Life Divine*, pp. 576-7.

It was Sri Aurobindo's chosen mission to supply this "basis of assured knowledge" so that the envisaged possibility could become at last a distinctive and splendorous actuality.

The first volume of *The Life Divine* begins, as we saw, with a reference to man's primeval and persistent longings for "God, Light, Freedom, Immortality", and concludes with the announcement that a divine life here "is the inevitable outcome and consummation of Nature's evolving endeavour".³⁴ The large aim of the formidable second volume is to set forth in almost overwhelming detail how exactly this founding of the Life Divine on a terrestrial base is to be promoted and ultimately accomplished. But, first, there is the portentous question: How did Ignorance — and its numerous progeny — get so ample a foothold on the earth? From Brahman, from Sachchidananda, — how or why did the decline towards our death-in-life start, how or why did the fall into the chasm of Ignorance or sleep of Matter come about?

Early in the first volume, there is a significant affirmation about the mystic relationship between Pure Existence (Being) and World-existence (Becoming):

World-existence is the ecstatic dance of Shiva which multiplies the body of the God numberlessly to the view: it leaves that white existence precisely where and what it was, ever is and ever will be; its sole absolute object is the joy of the dancing.³⁵

The Infinite breaking up into infinitesimals, the infinitesimals straining and converging back to the Infinite; Consciousness scattering into an infinity of insignificant quanta, and the melting and merging of these into the integrality of Consciousness — both movements are but turns in the

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 346. ³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 94.

"ecstatic dance". The point is elaborated in the second volume in its opening chapters. The truth of the Cosmic paradox is that Infinity is inherent in the infinitesimal:

Thus even the aspect or power of Inconscience, which seems to be an opposite, a negation of the eternal Reality, yet corresponds to a Truth held in itself by the self-aware and all-conscious Infinite. It is... the Infinite's power of plunging the consciousness into a trance of self-involution, a self-oblivion of the Spirit veiled in its own abysses where nothing is manifest but all inconceivably is and can emerge from that ineffable latency.... It is not a denial, it is one term, one formula of the infinite and eternal Existence.³⁶

Nay more: Reality transcendent (that is, beyond the manifestation), cosmic or universal Reality, and micro-cosmic Reality or the autonomy of the individual being, these too are not distinct absolutes but only terms of the One Existence, each containing secretly or overtly the other two.

But the question returns: If the universe of our perception and cognition is a creation by self-involution of the Infinite Consciousness, where is the room in it for Ignorance? It cannot be part and parcel of inconscient Matter, for after all Matter is expected ultimately to outgrow the stains and ulcers of the Ignorance. Neither can Ignorance be integral to the Spirit, for in that case Reality will be self-divided at the fountain-source itself — a supposition that must be ruled out altogether. What, then, is Ignorance?

Sri Aurobindo cuts the Gordian Knot by affirming that Ignorance too is Knowledge — only, it is partial or im-

³⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 378-9.

perfect knowledge. He sees no need to presuppose the existence of a beginningless Power that creates the illusions and unrealities of the world of phenomena. On the contrary, Sri Aurobindo posits

...an original, a supreme or cosmic Truth-Consciousness creative of a true universe, but with mind acting in that universe as an imperfect consciousness, ignorant, partly knowing, — a consciousness which is by its ignorance or limitation of knowledge capable of error, misrepresentation, mistaken or misdirected development from the known, of uncertain gropings towards the unknown, of partial creations and buildings, a constant half-position between truth and error, knowledge and nescience. But this ignorance in fact proceeds, however stumblingly, upon knowledge and towards knowledge; it is inherently capable of shedding the limitation, the mixture, and can turn by that liberation into the Truth-Consciousness, into a power of the original Knowledge.³⁷

There is, indeed, a whole spiral of Knowledge or Consciousness: at the bottom it is “the abyss of the unbodied Infinite”,³⁸ the shadowy image of nescience or inconscience; at the top it is Knowledge and Superconscience, “the kingdom of the Spirit’s power and light”,³⁹ and in the middle region, ruled by the divided Mind, it is Ignorance or muddled knowledge, “a coalition of uncertainties”.⁴⁰ “Maya” and “Avidya” are, thus, not the terrible absolutes that they are in Sankara’s metaphysics. Ignorance arises on the way, like atmospheric mist or fog, and it will also disappear on the way. It is neither beginningless Maya nor the stain of some original Sin;

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 519-20. ³⁸ *Savitri*, p. 3. ³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 341.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 271.

it is no more than a characteristic colouring at one stage in the descent of Consciousness, and when the counter-movement of ascent passes that stage, the colour will begin to fade and soon pass away, leaving Knowledge stainless and pure.

Still it may be asked: *Why* should Ignorance — even if it be only a transient eruption — ever arise at all? While attempting to answer this question, Sri Aurobindo refers to the concept of *līlā*, dismisses the cruder forms of its formulation, and then comes out with his own explanation:

...a God, himself all-blissful, who delights in the sufferings of creatures or imposes such suffering on them for the faults of his own imperfect creation, would be no Divinity.... But if the human soul is a portion of the Divinity, if it is a divine Spirit in man that puts on this imperfection and in the form of humanity consents to bear this suffering, or if the soul in humanity is meant to be drawn to the Divine Spirit and is His associate in the play of imperfection here, in the delight of perfect being elsewhere, the Lila may still remain a paradox, but it ceases to be a cruel or revolting paradox....⁴¹

Lila or amusement, certainly — but for whom? Not simply for the Divine at the expense of the individual “victims” involved in the play. Rather, it is a game in which these latter are themselves consenting parties eager for the play; if the will of the Divine Purusha made the cosmic creation possible, equally the assent of the individual Purusha must have preceded the individual manifestation. And yet, and yet, why all this bo-

⁴¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 485.

ther? Why make a steep descent, muddy oneself with the dirt and blind oneself with the smoke, and then, experience the ardours of a cleansing climb to the heights? To clear up this riddle, Sri Aurobindo can only cite everyday human experience:

...it is not altogether a mystery if we look at our own nature and can suppose some kindred movement of being in the beginning as its cosmic origin.... There is no greater pleasure for man himself than a victory which is in its very principle a conquest over difficulties, a victory in knowledge, a victory in power, a victory in creation over the impossibilities of creation, a delight in the conquest over an anguished toil and a hard ordeal of suffering. At the end of separation is the intense joy of union, the joy of a meeting with a self from which we were divided. There is an attraction in ignorance itself because it provides us with the joy of discovery.... If the Infinite's right of various self-manifestation is granted, this too as a possibility of its manifestation is intelligible and has its profound significance.⁴²

With regard to the broader question as to how an illimitable Divine Consciousness happened to undergo the process of limitation and separativeness, Sri Aurobindo recalls the ancient concept of *tapas* or "concentration of power of consciousness" and cites as an epigraph this well-known passage from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*:

He desired, 'May I be Many', he concentrated in Tapas, by Tapas he created the world; creating, he entered into it; entering, he became the existent and the beyond-existence, he became the expressed

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 487-8.

and the unexpressed, he became knowledge and ignorance, he became the truth and the falsehood.⁴³ Tapas being the characteristic of *sat* as well as *cit*, of the passive as well as the active Brahman and also of Anandamaya the Bliss of Brahman, the origin of the Ignorance must be sought for in a feat of Tapas that "builds a wall of separation which shuts out the consciousness in each form from awareness of its own total self, of other embodied consciousnesses and universal being".⁴⁴ In the act of congealment, water freezes, the free flow ceases, and masses of ice seem to assert their separativity — yet they are the same substance, they could be warmed up, they could be made to flow together again. The Ignorance — like the solidity of ice — is a vestige put on at one stage during the movement of Consciousness. If there is a "fall", it is but a preparation — a strategic retreat — that facilitates the surer fulfilment of the Divine purpose:

The Ignorance is a necessary, though quite subordinate term which the universal Knowledge has imposed on itself that that movement might be possible, — not a blunder and a fall, but a purposeful descent, not a curse, but a divine opportunity. To find and embody the All-Delight in an intense summary of its manifoldness, to achieve a possibility of the infinite Existence which could not be achieved in other conditions, to create out of Matter a temple of the Divinity would seem to be the task imposed on the spirit born into the material universe.⁴⁵

In Ignorance and Nescience there is no death, only a frenzy or a swoon of the All-Knowledge and All-Will;

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 673. ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 690. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 704.

this swoon and this frenzy are not eternal, — they have come up to the surface of existence for a little while, and they will be exceeded when they have fulfilled their cosmic tasks.⁴⁶

Perched on the spiral of evolution, man who has awakened from the swoon of inconscience or nescience is now caught up in the frenzy of the Ignorance, and he cries and gesticulates in terms of “error” and “falsehood”:

This then is the origin and nature of error, falsehood, wrong and evil in the consciousness and will of the individual; a limited consciousness growing out of nescience is the source of error, a personal attachment to the limitation and the error born of it the source of falsity, a wrong consciousness governed by the life-ego the source of evil... the emergence of the life-ego is... a machinery of cosmic Nature for the affirmation of the individual, for his self-disengagement from the indeterminate mass substance of the subconscious, for the appearance of a conscious being on a ground prepared by the Inconscience. The individual ego is a pragmatic and effective fiction... it is separated by ignorance from other-self and from the inner Divinity, but it is still pushed secretly towards an evolutionary unification in diversity; it has behind itself, though finite, the impulse to the infinite. But this in the terms of an ignorant consciousness translates itself into the will to expand, to be a boundless finite, to take everything it can to itself.... But because it does these things as a separate ego for its separate advantage and not by conscious interchange and mutuality, not by unity, (therefore)

⁴⁶ For a fuller discussion, the reader is referred to my article “The Problem of Evil” in *The Advent*, April 1946.

life-discord, disharmony arise, and it is the products of this life-discord and disharmony that we call wrong and evil. Nature accepts them because they are necessary circumstances of the evolution, necessary for the growth of the divided being; they are products of ignorance.... The evolutionary intention acts through the evil as through the good... this is the reason why we see evil coming out of what we call good and good coming out of what we call evil... our standards of both are evolutionary, limited and mutable.⁴⁷

The supreme Reality is indeed Sachchidananda, which as a deliberate jerk in its *lila* resorts to *tapas*, the Spirit thereby undergoing an involution into material forms, the One scattering into the Many. At the lowest level, where Consciousness is in a swoon, inconscience is the ruling law. The counter-movement of evolution starts from this material level, reaches up during the long aeons of geological time to the level of instinctive life in plant, insect and animal, and encompasses a further leap when out of life evolves mind and Homo Sapiens emerges as the visible crown and roof of creation. The analytical mind of man both clarifies and confuses, both helps and hinders further progress. Mental consciousness is apt to take the part for the whole, to be dazzled by false lights, to defeat itself by the very perfection of its analytical subtlety. Careering through an infinity of differentiations, it is apt to forget or deny altogether the integral harmony in which the differences vanish and only the unity remains. The progeny of Evil are real enough, but they are not the ultimate Truth; there are higher and more puissant realities than they, although

⁴⁷ *The Life Divine*, pp. 742-3.

man the mental being isn't ordinarily aware of them but chooses to be weighed down by the weary burden of the lower dualities. Of course Evil is not outright illusion, and the pictures we form with the aid of our mental consciousness are neither Truth nor Falsehood — they are partly true and partly false. Imperfect as they are, the pictures do not cancel the richer and profounder reality of the living Spirit behind, any more than a photograph or a painting cancels the fuller reality of the person or object. As the Rishi affirms in Sri Aurobindo's poem:

For grief and pain
Are errors of the clouded soul; behind
They do not stain
The living spirit who to these is blind.⁴⁸

Evil and its manifestations, then, are neither an eternal undivine power like Ahriman nor a mere nightmare thrown up by Avidya, but a force with only a limited validity at the mental rung in the evolution-involution stair of Consciousness. Inconscient matter knows neither joy nor pain, neither life nor death; Matter and Energy persist through seeming outward or functional changes, and are undestroyed and indestructible. Plant or animal life experiences the cycle of birth and growth and decay

⁴⁸ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol I, p. 159. There is also this vivid piece of autobiographical recordation, imbedded in "The Meditations of Mandavya", dated 1913 (*More Poems*, 1966, p. 27):

While on a terrace I walked at night,
He came and stung my foot. My soul surprised
Rejoiced in lovers' contact; but the mind
Thought of a scorpion and was snared by forms.
Still, still my soul remembered its delight
Denying mind, and midst the body's pain,
I laughed contented.

and death, but it is incapable of cerebration, and it indulges in no speculation about good and evil, pain and pleasure. It is man the mental being who has grown the faculty of interpreting phenomena in terms of the dualities. And yet human experience often jerks mental categories into hopeless confusion. Through the pangs of childbirth the mother experiences the ecstasy of fulfilment. Isn't there a terrible beauty in a mimic presentation of Shiva's *tāṇḍav* dance? Doesn't the football player thrill with a stern physical joy in the very violence of his exertions? The dualities, then, are not watertight compartments but permit, and indeed enforce, reversible reactions. The error and the falsity and the evil have thus ultimately a cosmic purpose of their own, and always it is the Divine Will, untouched by the dualities, that manoeuvres the mind and makes it create these intricate patterns of desire and pain and pleasure and incapacity.

IV

The second Part of the second Volume of *The Life Divine* — "The Knowledge and the Spiritual Evolution" — begins with a brilliant summing-up of the conclusions of the first Part and an indication of the ground yet to be covered in the second:

This then is the origin, this the nature, these the boundaries of the Ignorance. Its origin is a limitation of knowledge, its distinctive character a separation of the being from its own integrality and entire reality; its boundaries are determined by this separative development of the consciousness, for it shuts us to our true self and to the true self and whole nature

of things and obliges us to live in an apparent surface existence. A return or a progress to integrality, a disappearance of the limitation, a breaking down of separativeness, an overpassing of boundaries, a recovery of our essential and whole reality must be the sign and opposite character of the inner turn towards Knowledge. There must be a replacement of a limited and separative by an essential and integral consciousness identified with the original truth and the whole truth of self and existence.⁴⁹

If the way down is the road to the Ignorance and the Inconscience, the way up is the road to the spiritual Knowledge and the integral consciousness. The three crucial steps of self-achievement in this regard would be, firstly, the discovery of the psychic self or soul (behind the egoistic desire-self), secondly, the awareness of the kinship of our self with the self of all beings (these too being portions of the Divine), and, finally, an awareness of the Divine Being by identity with it, seeing in it the Divine within, the universal Self and the transcendent Divine. This difficult evolutionary process of Becoming, which is going on anyhow, can however be accelerated in the present condition of our self-awareness and ardent aspiration for change. After the immersion of the Spirit as a result of the material devolution, and after the phase of evolution in the Ignorance in transitional Man, now the stress naturally is on spiritual evolution, but in such a way that the triad matter-life-mind may also receive the transforming touch of the Spirit. In his arduous and anxious climb towards the heights, Man seeks support and light from both circumambient Nature and God the invisible Power, but he finds that the divers philoso-

⁴⁹ *The Life Divine*, p. 755.

phies and the warring religions only tend to confuse and distract him. Man perseveres nevertheless, and moves from higher to still higher peak, and arrives at more and more synoptic views of unity and harmony:

The quest of man for God, which becomes in the end the most ardent and enthralling of all his quests, begins with his first vague questionings of Nature and a sense of something unseen both in himself and her.... But it is when knowledge reaches its highest aspects that it is possible to arrive at its greatest unity. The highest and widest seeing is the wisest; for then all knowledge is unified in its one comprehensive meaning. All religions are seen as approaches to a single Truth, all philosophies as divergent viewpoints looking at different sides of a single Reality, all Sciences meet together in a supreme Science. For that which all our mind-knowledge and sense-knowledge and suprasensuous vision is seeking is found most integrally in the unity of God and man and Nature and all that is in Nature.⁵⁰

This faring forward, this labouring upward, this conquest of peak after peak of largeness, unity and harmony is the very pith of the Aurobindonian dialectic of ascent and integration:

The principle of the process of evolution is a foundation, from that foundation an ascent, in that ascent a reversal of consciousness and, from the greater height and wideness gained, an action of change and new integration of the whole nature.⁵¹ Onward and upward, then, out of the Sevenfold Ignorance to the Sevenfold Knowledge, and in individual

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 833, 835. ⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 863.

souls this process of evolution may continue over a period of several births and implicate worlds other than ours. Although Sri Aurobindo has no use for many of the traditional notions about Karma and Rebirth, he nevertheless thinks that, rightly interpreted, the concepts are relevant to the individual Purusha's adventure of consciousness:

...if there is an evolution of consciousness in an evolutionary body and a soul inhabiting the body, a real and conscious individual, then it is evident that it is the progressive experience of that soul in Nature which takes the form of this evolution of consciousness: rebirth is self-evidently a necessary part, the sole possible machinery of such an evolution.⁵²

Likewise with regard to the role of "worlds" other than ours — worlds occult or non-material — in this adventure, Sri Aurobindo concludes that these other worlds have their reality too, and powers, influences and phenomena do descend from them to this earth and other earths similarly sustained. Worlds that are "supernatural" to us may be "natural" in their own domain and exert an influence, for better or for worse, on earth-born creatures:

...given a complex universe and seven principles interwoven in every part of its system and naturally therefore drawn to act upon and respond to each other wherever they can at all get at one another, such an action, such a constant pressure and influence, is an inevitable consequence... inherent in the very nature of the manifested universe.⁵³

The evolutionary process (involving this and other lives,

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 911. ⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 942.

this and other "worlds"), having now reached the stage of Man the mental being — Man with his languages, crafts, sciences and technologies, his philosophies and religions, his social and political institutions, his arts of life and his menacing arts of death — well, what next? If he cannot (or will not) shed the limitations of his present mentality and grow into the Truth-Consciousness of the supramental status, he will have to be written off as a failure and the future will lie, perhaps, with another race. But the indications are that Man himself may be able, either to attain the supramental status himself, or at least to make his mind, life and body a responsive field of experimentation where the first decisive advances towards the Supermind may be made. The inner urge towards spiritualisation is already there, and the only question is whether it will prove strong enough to pierce the barrier between Mind and Supermind. Spirituality is really a revolutionary force, as may be seen from this description by Sri Aurobindo:

Spirituality is in its essence an awakening to the inner reality of our being, to a spirit, self, soul which is other than our mind, life and body, an inner aspiration to know, to feel, to be that, to enter into contact with the greater Reality beyond and pervading the universe which inhabits also our own being, to be in communion with It and union with It, and a turning, a conversion, a transformation of our whole being as a result of the aspiration, the contact, the union, a growth or waking into a new becoming or new being, a new self, a new nature.⁵⁴

More sure in its action than religion or occultism, both of which have played an important part in human affairs

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1021.

in the past, spirituality holds out the promise of richer results in the future. Even in past times, spirituality has had its votaries and beneficiaries, and intense spiritual activity has seen the making of "the saint, the devotee, the spiritual sage, the seer, the prophet, the servant of God, the soldier of the spirit".⁵⁵ But an even more sustained spiritual effort may be necessary if supramentalisation is to take place in the near or in some foreseeable future.

If egoistic mental man is ultimately to change into the spiritual man and Superman, his endeavour to forge ahead in the evolutionary scale must be met, half-way as it were, by a corresponding descent of Consciousness also. And this is how it will surely happen, as it has already happened in the earlier leaps of the evolutionary process. Human aspiration will organise itself into an integral effort to exceed the limitations of the Ignorance; and, simultaneously, the opportune descent of Consciousness will flood the shining tablelands of human endeavour. But in the process of descent, while the lower nature may be raised a little, the higher descending consciousness may suffer "a modification, dilution, diminution", and the resulting change too may have to share these limitations and obscurations. When Life descended into Matter and Mind into Life, they had to suit themselves to the resistance of the lower nature, and hence they were "not able to make a complete transformation of their material into a fit instrument and a changed substance revelatory of their real and native power". Between the great potentiality and the hard reality there falls the shadow of frustration and semi-defeat:

The life consciousness is unable to effectuate the

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1050.

greatness and felicity of its mighty or beautiful impulses in the material existence.... The mind is unable to achieve its high ideas in the medium of life or matter without deductions and compromises... its clarities of knowledge and will are not matched by its force to mould this inferior substance to obey and express it.... Neither life nor mind succeeds in converting or perfecting the material existence, because they cannot attain to their own full force in these conditions; they need to call in a higher power to liberate and fulfil them. But the higher spiritual-mental powers also undergo the same disability when they descend into life and matter....

Only the Supermind can thus descend without losing its full power of action.... The Truth-Consciousness, finding evolutionary Nature ready, has to descend into her and enable her to liberate the supramental principle within her; so must be created the supramental and spiritual being as the first unveiled manifestation of the truth of the Self and Spirit in the material universe.⁵⁶

The so-called ascending and descending movements are really the two ends of a single life-line of Consciousness, and what is needed is a closing of the gap, a joining, a soldering, an effective restoration of the circuit of the dynamic power of the Truth-Consciousness so that the "Big Change", the spiritual and supramental transformation, can be realised on the earth.

Now at long last we come to the heart of the matter: the Ascent towards the Supermind. Once the awakening to the inner soul-reality of our being and the awareness by identity of our soul-relationship with others and with the

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 1091-3.

universe have been realised — that is the essence of the psychic and spiritual transformations — the stage is set for the supreme supramental adventure. But in that realm of intangibilities, it would not be wise to look for a macadamised road usable by all and sundry. Actually, the “ascending possibilities” must be many, and Sri Aurobindo is content to indicate just one fairly typical line:

This line is, as all must be, governed by the natural configuration of the stair of ascent: there are in it many steps... no gap anywhere... the gradation can be resolved into a stairway of four main ascents... a series of sublimations of the consciousness through Higher Mind, Illumined Mind and Intuition into Overmind and beyond it; there is a succession of self-transmutations at the summit of which lies the Supermind or Divine Gnosis. All these degrees are gnostic in their principle and power.... Each stage of this ascent is therefore a general, if not a total, conversion of the being into a new light and power of a greater existence.⁵⁷

The steps of ascent or “slow gradations” between Mind and Supermind — Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind — spiritual-mental powers, superconscient so far as mental man is concerned, but definitely below sovereign Supermind. In the *Arya*, Overmind was not mentioned; it was identified later and found an important place in *The Life Divine* when it was published in definitive book form. Sri Aurobindo has described, succinctly in chapter xxviii of the first volume and with evocative brilliance of detail in chapter xxvi of the second volume, these four spiritual-mental powers:

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1116.

If we accept the Vedic image of the Sun of Truth, — an image which in this experience becomes a reality, — we may compare the action of the Higher Mind to a composed and steady sunshine, the energy of the Illumined Mind beyond it to an outpouring of massive lightnings of flaming sun-stuff. Still beyond can be met a yet greater power of the Truth-Force... Intuition... an intermediary of a greater Truth-Light.... At the source of this Intuition we discover... an Overmind that covers as with the wide wings of some creative Oversoul this whole lower hemisphere of Knowledge-Ignorance, links it with that greater Truth-Consciousness while yet at the same time with its brilliant golden Lid it veils the face of the greater Truth from our sight... the Power that at once connects and divides the supreme Knowledge and the cosmic Ignorance.⁵⁸

In the chapter on 'The Ascent Towards Supermind', Higher Mind is described as "a mind no longer of mingled light and obscurity or half-light, but a large clarity of the spirit" with a basic unitarian sense of being: Illumined Mind as a mind "no longer of higher Thought but of spiritual light... an intense lustre, a splendour and illumination of the spirit"; Intuition as a fourfold power of revelatory truth-seeing, truth-hearing, truth-touch and truth-discrimination; and Overmind as "a principle of global knowledge which carries in it a delegated light from the supramental gnosis".⁵⁹ The images are so vivid that it is clear that Sri Aurobindo is only describing what had become, since his first contacts at Alipur, a matter of daily experience for him. Although this "structural map

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 1118, 1123, 1129, 1130.

of the ascent to the supramental summit" is more tentative than definitive, the main configuration will stand. And normally the conquest of each peak has to be consolidated before the assault on the next higher peak may be made:

The soul may still be described as a traveller and climber who presses towards a high goal by step on step, each of which he has to build up as an integer but most frequently redescend in order to rebuild and make sure of the supporting stair... but the evolution of the whole consciousness... can be compared to a tide or a mounting flux, the leading fringe of which touches the higher degrees of a cliff or hill while the rest is still below.⁶⁰

The final or culminating assault or heave of the ascending ocean of consciousness is on the supramental citadel itself; Man must now grow into the complete Superman, the supramental being, or the Gnostic being. The induction of the supramental principle and power into the human being must also mean the gradual supramentalisation of man's environment, in other words the transformation of nature into supernature. The "gnostic being" would be the consummation of the climb of the spiritual man:

...his whole way of being, thinking, living, acting would be governed by the power of a vast universal spirituality. All the trinities of the Spirit would be real to his self-awareness and realised in his inner life... all his action would originate from and obey the supreme Self and Spirit's divine governance of Nature.⁶¹

Supramentalisation or gnosticisation would not, of course,

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1137. ⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 1156.

mean a sudden or wholesale annulment of the lower orders and formations of consciousness, from Overmind to Mind, from Mind to Matter: the hierarchy would continue, but would be progressively emptied of the incursions of the Ignorance:

The supramental transformation, the supramental evolution must carry with it a lifting of mind, life and body out of themselves into a greater way of being in which yet their own ways and powers would be, not suppressed or abolished, but perfected and fulfilled by the self-exceeding.⁶²

But even if the supramentalised individuals should be but a few, their influence on the rest would still be profound. The "untransformed part of humanity" must throw up in due course more and more highly evolved beings, some intuitivised, some overmentalised, some in constant communion with the higher thought-planes.⁶³ Sri Aurobindo also makes it clear that, although it is the elected individual who spearheads each evolutionary advance, he will not by himself be able to bring about the transformation of the earth-nature; a "critical mass" of such individuals too would be necessary:

The inner change can begin to take shape in a collective form only if the gnostic individual finds others who have the same kind of inner life as himself and can form with them a group with its own autonomous existence or else a separate community or order of being with its own inner law of life.⁶⁴

With the appearance of the gnostic being and the beginnings of the gnostic dispensation in earth-nature, the "Life Divine" itself would become no longer a pretext

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 1168. ⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 1204. ⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1260.

for dreaming and speculative system-building but a marvel of daily manifestation and realisation. Indeed, the change from our present to the new gnostic consciousness would prove to be a fundamental change in the very texture, temper and tone of existence:

Our nature, our consciousness is that of beings ignorant of each other, separated from each other, rooted in a divided ego, who must strive to establish some kind of relation between their embodied ignorances.... An innate character of the gnostic consciousness and the instrumentation of supernature is a wholeness of sight and action, a unity of knowledge with knowledge, a reconciliation of all that seems contrary in our mental seeing and knowing, an identity of Knowledge and Will acting as a single power in perfect unison with the truth of things....⁶⁵

At the end of this monumental work, Sri Aurobindo refers to the present "evolutionary crisis" in earth-history when two wholly opposed possibilities seem to be open to Man: either an accelerated pursuit of new wants and the "aggressive expansion of the collective ego" that must lead mankind to the Abyss, or a daring spiritual-supramental adventure of consciousness leading to the Life Divine on a terrestrial base. Of this latter possibility Sri Aurobindo writes in his dual role as prophet and forerunner:

...what has to be developed is there in our being and not something outside it: what evolutionary Nature presses for is an awakening to the knowledge of self, the discovery of self, the manifestation of the self and spirit within us and the release of

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 1230-2.

its self-knowledge, its self-power, its native self-instrumentation. It is, besides, a step for which the whole of evolution has been a preparation and which is brought closer at each crisis of human destiny.... Our evolution in the Ignorance with its chequered joy and pain of self-discovery and world-discovery, its half-fulfilments, its constant finding and missing, is only our first state. It must lead inevitably towards an evolution in the Knowledge, a self-finding and self-unfolding of the Spirit, a self-revelation of the Divinity in things in that true power of itself in Nature which is to us still a Supernature."⁶⁶

There is a significant postscript, too — or so it might be called. *The Life Divine* was published in 1939-40, but when Sri Aurobindo contributed a series of articles in 1949-50 to the *Bulletin of Physical Education* (since collected as *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*, 1952) he mentioned a new concept, a newly realised power of consciousness, which he called Mind of Light. This was obviously the result of some striking realisations and developments subsequent to the publication of *The Life Divine* ten years earlier. The implication in these articles is that, perhaps, it may not always be necessary to march methodically, step by step, marking the milestones on the way to Supermind. Even in *The Life Divine* there is the suggestion that "a direct and unveiled intervention from above" and "a total submission and surrender of the lower consciousness" might force the pace and ensure the completeness of the transformation;⁶⁷ and it is further affirmed that such intervention "would not annul the evolutionary principle, for

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 1259, 1271-2. ⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 1098.

supermind has the power of withholding or keeping in reserve its force of knowledge as well as the power of bringing it into full or partial action".⁶⁸ Suppose the Supermind acted directly on the Mind, skipping so to say the four middle steps, might not mental consciousness be charged then with the Supermind's white radiance of Knowledge and be transformed in consequence as Mind of Light?⁶⁹ Technically it would be below Higher Mind, yet it might be more intrinsically (if feebly) supramental than the four higher states of the spiritual-mind and it might also solve humanity's immediate problem of meeting the evolutionary crisis:

A mind of light will replace the present confusion and trouble of this earthly ignorance... a new humanity uplifted into Light, capable of a spiritualised being and action, open to governance by some light of the Truth-Consciousness, capable even on the mental level and in its own order of something that might be called the beginning of a divinised life.⁷⁰

With the settled rule of the Mind of Light, a "gnostic mentality" may replace the ordinary mentality "even before the Supermind is reached".⁷¹ In these essays Sri Aurobindo has only thrown a few hints, and there is even a certain ambiguity regarding the exact location of the Mind of Light in the hierarchy of powers. Lesser than the powers of the spiritual-mind, yet a force of pure (if subdued) light, a new power of consciousness that is the result of

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 1153-4.

⁶⁹ When *The Supramental Manifestation Upon Earth* was published in New York by E.P. Dutton & Company in 1953, it was given the title *The Mind of Light*.

⁷⁰ *The Supramental Manifestation* (1952), p. 122. ⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 128.

the direct action of Supermind on Mind — not a pre-existing power like Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition or Overmind! There can be little doubt that this promise of the early realisation — or news of the actual realisation — of the Mind of Light upon the earth must be viewed as the prelude to the coming supramental manifestation, for, if Mind of Light comes (or has come) indeed, can Supermind be far behind?⁷²

V

In the preceding Sections an attempt has been made to present the leading ideas in Sri Aurobindo's *magnum opus*, often in his own words. It is verily a Manifesto for the Future, a supramental manifesto that holds out the clear promise of an Age of Knowledge and Puissance and Felicity in the place of our world of ignorance and division and frustration. And so much of *The Life Divine* is the recordation of his own adventures and realisations in the invisible realms of consciousness that a direct description of the book becomes, in effect, a portrait as well of his inner life.

The great aim of the *Arya* was "the formation of a vast synthesis of knowledge, harmonising the divers religious traditions of humanity, occidental as well as oriental", and *The Life Divine* sequence took a lead in this regard. However, it was when it came out in its revised

⁷² For a full discussion of the subject, the reader is referred to Synergist's 'A Divine Life in a Divine Body' (*Mother India*, June 1952), K. D. Sethna's 'The Descent of the Supermind' in *Mother India*, December 1953, pp. 11ff. and Kishor Gandhi's 'The New Humanity' included in his book, *Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the New Age* (1965).

form as a book that *The Life Divine* gained world recognition as a metaphysical treatise *in excelsis*. One profound student of spiritual thought, V. Chandrasekharam, remarked that *The Life Divine* "has the character of a perfectly natural and inevitable synthesis of all that is valuable in the various main lines of intellectual seeking and vision, of aspiration and discipline, of upward effort and aim, of the Ancient and the Modern world, of the West and the East".⁷³ A Western scholar, Charles A. Moore, writes:

This, then, is the true wisdom of the Indian mind. It is truly comprehensive. It includes the insights of the East and the insights of the West. It combines their respective unique emphases.... Sri Aurobindo has thus arrived at a comprehensive and, to all intents and purposes, all-inclusive view of the universe and life, providing a world philosophy which in effect brings together the East and the West.⁷⁴

Otto Wolff, the German Protestant theologian, has also remarked that "it is not only Indians who see in him (Sri Aurobindo) the last arch of a bridge of human thought and endeavour which leads from the Vedic beginnings to the present, and transcends the ordinary limits of human consciousness". And the English novelist, Dorothy Richardson, once wrote to the present writer after reading *The Life Divine*: "Has there ever existed a more synthetic consciousness than that of Sri Aurobindo? Unifying he is to the limit of the term".

One seasoned Indian philosopher, the late S. K. Maitra, after making a comparative study of Sri Aurobindo and

⁷³ *Sri Aurobindo's "The Life Divine"* (1941), p. 105.

⁷⁴ *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, edited by Haridas Chaudhuri and Frederic Spiegelberg (1960), p. 107.

many Western philosophical thinkers, reached the conclusion:

May we not say that... there is a philosophic yoga which converts the philosophies with which we are familiar into the ideal philosophy, the philosophy that is to be the future philosophy! An outline of this philosophic yoga Sri Aurobindo has given in his writings.⁷⁵

'East' and 'West', of course, are blanket terms, and by 'East' Professor Maitra meant the Indian philosophical tradition. Being "value-centric", Indian philosophy fuses the existential, logical and value aspects into the unitive vision of Sachchidananda. Besides, philosophical theory and yogic practice have gone hand in hand in India. Western philosophy is more theoretical than practical, cosmic rather than individual, and intellectual rather than spiritual; it is also in sympathy with an evolutionary rather than a static or cyclical scheme of things. In Sri Aurobindo's philosophy as outlined in *The Life Divine*, the traditional Indian view of cyclical change has given place to the Western theory of evolution, but this has been linked up with the idea of spiritual involution. The Indian stress on the individual's destiny and the Western stress on the cosmic background both find fulfilment in Sri Aurobindo's thought which posits the possibility of individual effort starting the alchemic process of the divinisation of man and nature. Finally, the Indian preoccupation with the Spirit and the Western preoccupation with material life are adroitly and convincingly gathered in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy into a great

⁷⁵ S.K. Maitra, *The Meeting of the East and the West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy* (1968), p. 65.

affirmation that denies neither Spirit nor matter, but sees them both in the one utterly inclusive arc of Omnipresent Reality.

Some of Maitra's comparative studies are in the nature of fraternal encounters between philosophers, interesting to watch as well as rewarding in result. Plato and Sri Aurobindo, for example: what a rare concatenation! They were seers and poets both, but Plato's philosophy "is haunted by a sense of incompleteness: its intuition and reason cannot be reconciled with each other".⁷⁶ Plotinus' double trinity of the Divine and of the Human principles is paralleled by Sri Aurobindo's double quartets, the upper and the lower hemispheres divided by a wall of obscuration:

The central idea of the double world-order of both Plotinus and Sri Aurobindo is that the higher world sets the standard for the lower.... But however poor an imitation (of the higher world) it may be, the lower world is not a world of shadows but has a real status.⁷⁷

Whereas the Hegelian dialectic with its emphasis on continuity creates the impression that we can reach the Absolute as a matter of course, in the Aurobindonian view the ascent is not inevitable but is conditioned by the descent of the higher Consciousness or of Grace at every step of the evolutionary march.⁷⁸ Nicolai Hartmann's dualism of Value and Reality is in sharp contrast to Sri Aurobindo's affirmation that there is but one Value which is also the one Reality (Sachchidananda).⁷⁹ Bergson and Sri Aurobindo, "two thinkers of the greatest creative power of the present day", were both prophets

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 300. ⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 194.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 257, 271. ⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 222.

of Evolution, both "volcanic" thinkers, and if for the European philosopher "the ultimate destiny of man... is to be one with the life-current... to be identical with God", for the Indian philosopher man's destiny is to exceed himself and become the Gnostic Being.⁸⁰ Again, A. N. Whitehead the "most systematic thinker in the West today as Sri Aurobindo is in the East", took all knowledge for his province like his Indian contemporary, but his philosophy of Organism is a pretty colourless abstraction — "a structure that hangs in mid-air, having neither a foundation nor any roof"⁸¹ — as compared with Sri Aurobindo's inspiring vision of the Divine Lotus of Gnostic Life spring out of the ooze of the Life in the Ignorance. And, finally, although Nietzsche and Sri Aurobindo both emphasised the fact that "if the world is really to be raised to a higher level, it can only be done through a new and higher race of men and not through individual salvation of individual men", their respective images of the coming Superman were very different:

What Nietzsche means by a Superman is a Titan or Asura and not a god. It is quite otherwise, however, with Sri Aurobindo, whose Superman is the God-Man who excels man not in physical strength or in the power to rule and to conquer, but in things of the spirit.⁸²

But of course — while these filiations and deviations between Sri Aurobindo and his Western contemporaries are interesting enough — there could be no question of any direct influence in either direction.

Of other European thinkers, Martin Heidegger the Existentialist, G. I. Gurdjieff the prophet of the new gnosticism, and Teilhard de Chardin the Jesuit evolu-

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 102. ⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 437. ⁸² *ibid.*, p. 334.

tionist come closer to Sri Aurobindo than the others already mentioned. Here, again, any similarities that we may perceive do not necessarily indicate — much less prove — any derivative “influence”. If Sri Aurobindo “saw” things first and didn’t merely think his way to them, Heidegger too minimised the importance of mere thinking, and set far greater store on living, experiencing, realising. In this, and in other respects as well (for example, the emphasis on the need to transform the earth rather than to save our souls), “Heidegger and Aurobindo, without knowing of the existence of each other, agree at depths”.⁸³ According to Heidegger, essential or fundamental thinking takes the complementary forms of (1) *thinking* that utters Being; (2) *poetising* that names the Holy, and (3) *thanking* that is a sacrificial offering through total devotion to Being with the aim of illuminating the basic truth of things. Heidegger the philosopher found in Holderlin his perfect poetic counterpart, but Sri Aurobindo the author of *The Life Divine* discovered in himself his own ideal poetic “other half”. Thus what is uttered in *The Life Divine* was to be named and celebrated in *Savitri*, the creation of his later years.

The Gnostic system associated with Gurdjieff (and his disciple, P. O. Ouspensky) has no doubt certain resemblances with Sri Aurobindo’s, but the differences are more important still. “Know thyself!” is the beginning of Gurdjieff’s system, as indeed it is the beginning of all spiritual knowledge. What is man? — a machine, a clock (so to say) with seven springs or minds functioning, these centres being the intellectual, the emo-

⁸³ Frederic Spiegelberg, in *The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 53.

tional, sex, the instinctive, the moving, the higher emotional and the higher intellectual, the last two generally quiescent in most people! A machine, functioning mechanically; and man's normal condition is one of sleep, and he lives somnambulistically from birth to death. Only when he awakes from this dream-life to real life can he escape from this automatism and learn to live a life of his own. What we talk of as phenomena are the result of three forces: active, passive and neutralising (or downward, upward and integrating). These forces are in perfect harmony in the Absolute, but down the scale of creation (or 'involution' as Sri Aurobindo might call it), they separate, mingle, separate again and the divers worlds, the suns, the planets, the earth and the moon, come into existence. It is just as possible to go down the Ray of Creation as it is to go up, as possible to go on sleeping as to wake up and act! While Gurdjieff's system, as a system, looks formidably complicated and elaborately self-explanatory, the question arises whether it is drawn upon a fount of original spiritual experience or is no more than a *tour de force* of the speculative intellect. It is in this respect that Sri Aurobindo's Supermind has a decisive advantage over Gurdjieff's "Enneagram" and its transformations. In the course of a review-article, D. S. Savage wrote in 1950:

The Consciousness which is identical with Being can be no other than the Divine Consciousness, or Supermind, of which a thinker like Sri Aurobindo is able to assert: "Supermind sees the universe and its contents as itself in a single indivisible act of knowledge, an act which is its life, which is the very movement of its self-existence". This insight is very far from both Ouspensky and Gurdjieff, for

with them the entire process of knowledge is reversed, and instead of a primary spiritual intuition which is only afterward elaborated by the reasoning mind, the analytical intellect begins from material existence and, endeavouring to climb upwards by its own strength, succeeds only in converting everything it finds into its own image and likeness.⁸⁴

There may be some faint seeping of an ancient and genuine gnosis in Gurdjieff's system, but it doesn't seem to show to any potent effect.

The objection to the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky system — namely, its lack of religious affiliation or of a grounding on some seminal spiritual experience — cannot, however, be raised in respect of the French Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin's, as outlined principally in the posthumously published work, *The Phenomenon of Man* (1960). Born to orthodoxy in a Catholic family, Teilhard entered the Society of Jesus. During the time of his theological training at Hastings in Sussex, he seems to have become increasingly conscious "of a profound ontological total drift of the universe" around him, filling the whole horizon of his consciousness.⁸⁵ When the first world war broke out, he was in it throughout, and it was while serving as a stretcher-bearer that he started wrestling with the "first and last" things. Returning to the Order, he became a palaeontologist and did some outstanding research during his long stay in China. Since his childhood days, Teilhard had been gripped by the world of

⁸⁴ *The Spectator*, 28 April 1950, in the review-article 'The New Gnosticism'. In his *A Study of Gurdjieff's Teaching* (1957), Kenneth Walker also has tried in one or two places to read Gurdjieff's teaching in the light of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

⁸⁵ Nicolas Corte's *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: His Life and Spirit*, translated by Martin Jarrett-Kerr (1950).

phenomena — especially the material world — and subsequent to the spiritual experience at Hastings and during the dreary years of the war and the long years afterwards, he thought out his conclusions, based on the insights provided by his scientific studies and research and also his own intuitions into the ultimate truth of things. He threw out hints of these speculations in his letters, but the actual formulation was made in *Le Milieu divin* ('The Divine Milieu') written in 1926-7 and *Le Phénomène humain* ('The Phenomenon of Man') written some ten years later. The works, however, couldn't be published in his lifetime, but after his death at the age of seventy-four in 1955, these and other writings of his have been published and widely discussed, and have won for him a place among the great philosophical thinkers of our time.

Sri Aurobindo, a Vedantic revolutionary and poet; Fr. Teilhard, a Roman Catholic and biologist: they were not professional philosophers, philosophy came to them — just as cosmic consciousness came to them suddenly, unexpectedly, overwhelmingly, to Sri Aurobindo in 1908 in the Alipur jail and to Teilhard during the war of 1914-8. Besides, both Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard saw earth-history and human history in terms of Evolution, the adventure pointing towards the ultimate divinisation of man; and like Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard also saw Evolution interlinked with Involution:

...let it be noted that, by the very fact of the individualisation of our planet, a certain mass of elementary consciousness was originally imprisoned in the matter of earth... the early earth is itself, and in its totality, the incredible complex germ we are seeking.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *The Phenomenon of Man*, translated by Bernard Wall, p. 72.

...if the universe, regarded sidereally, is in process of spatial expansion (from the infinitesimal to the immense), in the same way and still more clearly it presents itself to us, physico-chemically, as in process of organic *involution* upon itself (from extremely simple to the extremely complex)....⁸⁷

And the Aurobindonian Supermind finds its parallel in the Teilhardian concept of the Omega Point:

Only one reality seems to survive and be capable of succeeding and spanning the infinitesimal and the immense: energy — that floating, universal entity from which all emerges and into which all falls back as into an ocean; energy, the new spirit; the new god. So, at the world's Omega, as at its Alpha, lies the Impersonal.⁸⁸

There is also, in Teilhard's treatment of the problem of pain and individual human suffering, the same assumption as in Sri Aurobindo that the incidence of such evil is inseparable from the evolutionary process.

Again, both Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin took the material world as seriously as they did the Spirit. If Sri Aurobindo wrote on 20 May 1915: "Heaven we have possessed, but not the earth; but the fullness of the Yoga is to make, in the formula of the Veda, 'Heaven and Earth equal and one'", Teilhard wrote in 1934 in his *Comment Je crois* ('How I Believe'):

If, as a result of some interior revolution, I were successively to lose my faith in Christ, my faith in a personal God, my faith in the Spirit, I think that I would still continue to believe in the World.... I surrender myself to this undefined faith in a single

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 301. ⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 258.

and infallible World, wherever it may lead me.⁸⁹ If Sri Aurobindo disapproved certain Hindu "orthodoxies" like the popular doctrines of Mayavāda and Karma, Teilhard disliked no less and chafed under the excessive legalism and sacerdotalism of the Church. But Teilhard himself was only too ready to equate Hinduism with Mayavāda and the theory of Karma:

India — the region *par excellence* of high philosophic and religious pressures.... But however efficacious these currents for ventilating and illuminating the atmosphere of mankind, we have to recognise that, with their excessive passivity and detachment, they were incapable of building the world.... Phenomena regarded as an illusion (Maya) and their connections as a chain (Karma), what was left in these doctrines to animate and direct human evolution?⁹⁰ And yet, over twenty years before Teilhard wrote these lines, Sri Aurobindo had already formulated his Supramental Manifesto, showing how the pace of human evolution was to be accelerated and how the rebuilding of the world was to be promoted with a view to the establishment of the Life Divine upon the earth.

Again, if Sri Aurobindo goes back to the Gita, the Upanishads and above all to the Veda to secure corroboration for his Yogic insights and overhead realisations, Teilhard likewise finds support for his intuitions, not in the Sermon on the Mount, but in St. Paul's utterances and assurances. In Teilhard's view, Evolution has been facilitated so far by a tendency in the functioning of the universe towards increasing complexity-cons-

⁸⁹ Quoted by K. D. Sethna in 'The Real Religion of Teilhard de Chardin', *Mother India*, December 1966, p. 33.

⁹⁰ *The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 210.

ciousness, and the next evolutionary jump may very well mean the convergence of humanity upon itself and the universal reign of something akin to cosmic consciousness. Hasn't St. Paul said that, in the fullness of time, all things might be gathered in Christ, "both which are in heaven and which are on the earth"?⁹¹ The "fall", then, interpreted in a cosmic sense, would only mean the swoon of the Spirit in matter — the deviation from the Spirit's "oneness, integrality and harmony that was the necessary condition for the great plunge into the Ignorance which is the soul's adventure in the world and from which was born our suffering and aspiring humanity".⁹² The movement of Evolution would now take the world back to the Cosmic Christ — or what practically comes to the same thing, to Sachchidananda. And this reunion and transfiguration will be achieved through a supreme efflorescence of Love or Love charged with knowledge, power and beauty (*satyam, śivam, sundaram*).

Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard: Vedanta and Christianity — these are four intersecting circles of spiritual experience and thought with a substantial common ground between them. Eva Olsson has made a fair-minded attempt to compare Sri Aurobindo's thought with Christian theology and practice, noting the main affinities as well as differences between them. "Sin" has no place in Sri Aurobindo's system, and the role of Evil is muted; Christ was certainly an avatar, but not the only one, the unique incarnation. As against these differences, both Christianity and Sri Aurobindo firmly believe that "Man is only a step in the development of creation to be superseded, transformed, perfected"; and not Man only, but all

⁹¹ Ephesians, 1.10.

⁹² *The Life Divine*, p. 188.

creation is to be transformed as well. In Eva Olsson's words:

Sri Aurobindo's message calls men back to the life process itself. Christ did the same, but as centuries have passed, we seem to have become forgetful of that call.⁹³

On the other hand, K. D. Sethna pleads persuasively that the Teilhardian intuitions and insights, amplified by the Aurobindonian revelations and affirmations, should pave the way for what he calls a "Vedantic Christianity". Teilhard's "Cosmic Christ" must lead "to an Indianised Christianity giving prominence to Patheos but holding the transcendent Divine as its prime concept"; and Christ would be one among the great avatars, and for Christians the chosen avatar of worship or *iṣṭa devatā*.⁹⁴ And what is needed is not Teilhard cut down Procrustes-like to what may pass for orthodox Christianity or Sri Aurobindo straight-jacketed into traditional Vedanta but a dynamic new force, infused by a sense of urgency and the spirit of modern science, a force for revolutionary change and transformation of man's and the earth's nature:

His (Teilhard's) natural connections are with spiritual India through scientific Europe and, by an inspired gathering up of several strands of spiritual India, his system provides pointers in the direction of the luminous largeness of Sri Aurobindo. Teilhard can be fulfilled in his proper role by nothing except this largeness which overpasses all religions and their possible dialogue and ushers in a new age of comprehensive spirituality — both individual and col-

⁹³ *The Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo in the Light of the Gospel* (1959), pp. 70-1.

⁹⁴ *Mother India*, December 1966, p. 48.

lective — where the Phenomenon of Man will be a part of a Divine Milieu in the most explicit, concrete and complete sense.⁹⁵

So, then, the East and the West at their quintessential best would be meeting purposively and creatively, after all. The four circles of spiritual experience and thought may be distinctive enough, yet if the intersection of the four provides a significant common area of agreed strategy for the future, that would be a spur to the great evolutionary endeavour that is to lift Man to the height of “greater Man” or Superman and unite all in the mystic body of “Cosmic Christ” or Sachchidananda.

One final question: How about the other great religions of our time? Islam, for example, and Buddhism; and also — how about Marxism, which is as good as a religion for millions? In the course of three lectures on ‘Evolution and the Modern World’ given at St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, in 1970, Professor R. C. Zaehner made a comparative evaluation of Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin, and incidentally discussed their thought in relation to Marxism:

Vedānta — Marxism — Christianity. In this at least Teilhard and Aurobindo agree: these, they think, are the only possible alternatives before mankind, — the three ‘religions’ of modern man.⁹⁶

Islam comes into the picture also because, in Muhammad Iqbal (and his *Asrar-i-Khudi* or ‘The Secrets of the Self’), “Islam found its own Aurobindo”. As for Buddhism, it

⁹⁵ *Mother India*, March 1966, p. 38.

⁹⁶ This and the following quotations are taken from the mimeographed copy of the lectures that I have with me. The lectures have since been published with the title, *Evolution in Religion: A Study in Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin* (1971).

represents "the same kind of spirituality as Sankara's Vedanta: it is not primarily interested in this world". There is Zen Buddhism, of course, but "Zen is cosmic consciousness; and would be duly gathered into the integral and convergent vision of Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard". The question therefore reduces itself to this: What shall we do with Marxism? Although both Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard were in full sympathy with its humanistic philosophy, they couldn't appreciate its denial of the Spirit or applaud its political translation in Russia or China. Sri Aurobindo's views on this question are succinctly stated in some of his "aphorisms":

The communistic principle of society is intrinsically as superior to the individualistic as is brotherhood to jealousy and mutual slaughter; but all practical schemes of Socialism invented in Europe are a yoke, a tyranny and a prison.

If communism ever re-establishes itself successfully upon earth, it must be on a foundation of soul's brotherhood and the death of egoism.⁹⁷

The classless society prophesied by Marx and Engels hasn't materialised so far because democracy, socialism and communism haven't been able in actual practice to end the human tendency to egoistic separativity, assertiveness and rivalry and their attendant evils of exploitation in economic life and corruption, violence and liquidation in political life. It is only when the spiritual revolution resulting in the cracking of the human ego comes about that the godheads of the soul — justice, liberty, equality, brotherhood — will be realised on a permanent basis in a "Kingdom of the Saints" as was dreamt of by Christianity, Islam and Puranic Hinduism.⁹⁸ That would

⁹⁷ *Thoughts and Aphorisms* (1968 edition), pp. 80-1. ⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 81.

be the divinised society of the future, and that would also be the true communistic society."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ At the Bombay Seminar on 'Sri Aurobindo and Indian Literature' (14 May 1972), more than one Urdu scholar (K. A. Faruqi, Malik Ram, Waheed Akhtar) referred to the similarities between Sir Muhammad Iqbal and Sri Aurobindo. Both had been critical of Sankara's Mayavada. Both had visualised a great future for the present unfinished man. And Dr. Akhtar added: "The comparative study of Iqbal and Aurobindo can reveal, not only certain similarities, but also their identity.... Both Iqbal and Aurobindo based their thought on the spirituality of the Orient and were opposed to the intellectualism of the West.... Both aimed at the spiritualisation of scientific knowledge".

CHAPTER NINETEEN

LIGHTS ON SCRIPTURE

1

If Sri Aurobindo gave the place of honour in the *Arya* to *The Life Divine*, he started two other important sequences also in the very first issue of the journal — *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Secret of the Veda*. The *Synthesis* was planned as a survey and as an assessment of various systems of Yoga past and present with reference to their relevance to his own “integral Yoga” which was duly to grow into “supramental Yoga”; it was thus conceived as the practical side to the theoretical or philosophical foundations that were to be established in *The Life Divine*. The *Synthesis* appeared month after month from August 1914 to January 1921, and even then was left in a sense incomplete. *The Secret of the Veda* had, however, a different purpose altogether; it was meant to explore and locate the remotest origins of this Yoga, the roots of the aswatha-like magnificence of the spiritual philosophy of *The Life Divine*, the ancient corroborations (or, rather, seminal anticipations) of this Supramental Manifesto. Other sequences — notably *Essays on the Gita*, *The Psychology of Social Development*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *A Defence of Indian Culture* and *The Future Poetry* — were started later, and usually four or five or six books were thus being written (or were writing themselves out!) serially at one time. As Satprem has put it, Sri Aurobindo wrote “in a strange way; it was not one book after another, but four or even six books at a

time that he wrote".¹ He had providentially stumbled upon the master-key to the mystic chambers of phenomenal life, and every lock that barred admission anywhere opened at the key's magic touch and revealed new pathways, new surmises, new possibilities, winding new slopes of ascent, beckoning new summits of realisation.

Every chapter of *The Life Divine* was headed by one or more — sometimes as many as six or more — epigraphs, culled from ancient Indian scripture or the classics of spiritual philosophy. The main authorities are the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. In the revised definitive edition of *The Life Divine*, out of a total of about 165 epigraphs distributed between fifty-six chapters, as many as 85 are from the Upanishads, nearly 60 from the Vedas (mostly from the Rig Veda, and one from Yajur Veda and three from Atharva Veda), over 20 from the Gita, and one each from the *Vishnu Purana* and Sankara's *Vivekachudamani*. To sustain an argument (be it *pūrva-pakṣa* or *siddhānta*) by reference to ancient authority has been the traditional Indian way of convincingly projecting a dialectic, and Sankara, Ramanuja, and the numerous other commentators on the *Brahma Sutras* and the Gita have not hesitated to draw profusely on scripture. This universe is, after all, a self-adjusted continuum in which nothing suddenly erupts as from a total vacuum, and what strikes us as something "new" has but sprouted from a seed obscurely secreted in distant past formations. This was the reason why system-makers have usually wished to make out that they were fulfilling what was implied in old scripture, rather than fabricating something wholly new. Sri Aurobindo was thus merely following a practice sanctified by long usage.

¹ *Sri Aurobindo: The Adventure of Consciousness*, p. 302.

Sri Aurobindo had followed certain pathways at Baroda — at Alipur — at Chandernagore — and had chanced upon certain insights, and he had found his way to certain spiritual realisations. At Alipur he had grown intimate with the Gita and had explored the "Himalayas of the Soul" by entering into the spirit of the Upanishads. It was natural that, after his acquittal and release, he should carry these lights to the new spheres of his activity. He spoke at Uttarpara like one whom prison-life had renewed and transfigured. He preached Sanatan Dharma in the accents of a prophet. He published his translations of the *Isha*, *Kena* and other Upanishads in the *Karmayogin*. He wrote on India's great scriptures in the *Dharma*. The Vedas were "the basis of the Hindu dharma, but very few knew the real form and the fundamental truth of that basis";² and although the Upanishads unveiled for us "the supreme Knowledge, the naked limbs of the real man", few were inclined to go

For a thousand years we have accepted the meaning given by Sankara; the commentary by Sankara has become our Veda, our Upanishad. Why should we take the trouble of studying the Upanishads in the original? Even when we do so, if ever we come across any commentary which contradicts Sankara, we immediately reject it as false.³ The Rishis of the Upanishads had arrived at Knowledge, not by force of logic or fluke of unpredictable inspiration, but by direct Vision that came as the crown of tapasya — the Yoga that tore the veil of Appearance or Ignorance and revealed the Real, the Vast, the Truth. The

² *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, Number 26 (1967), p. 43.

³ *ibid.*, p. 43.

need, then, was to get back to the Upanishads, and go beyond them too — to the Vedas.

If Upanishad and Veda were the 'Sruti', the Puranas were the 'Smriti':

The revelations of the Rishis who were accomplished in Yoga and endowed with spiritual insight, and the Word which the Master of the Universe spoke to their purified intelligence, constitute the 'Sruti'. Ancient knowledge and learning, preserved through countless generations, is known as the 'Smriti'.⁴

Although not as "infallible" as the Sruti, the Smriti also — notably the *Vishnu Purana* and the *Bhagavata* — have been included among the "authoritative scriptures of the Hindu dharma".⁵ As for the *Gita*, it was Sri Aurobindo's ardent hope that it might become "the universally acknowledged Scripture of the future religion".⁶

Soon after his arrival in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo embarked upon an adventure in Vedic exegesis and interpretation by delving into the riches of the original Sanskrit instead of the anaemic, if not also flawed, English or Bengali renderings. He had found corroboration (or road-signs) for his integral Yoga in the *Gita* and in the Upanishads, and he now wondered whether he might not find similar corroboration (or clues) for his supramental Yoga in the still earlier Vedas. Seeking light from this most ancient scripture of humanity, he found that his intuitions and deeper experiences hadn't misled him, and in the very process of looking for light he was able to throw new light on the Vedas. His intui-

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 57.

tions helped him to read the Vedas as they should be read, and this right reading of the Vedas — of the Rig Veda especially — reinforced his evolving philosophy of life-transformation and world-transformation, the philosophy that was to be set forth in all its amplitude in *The Life Divine*. It was thus not at all surprising that, when the *Arya* came to be launched, Sri Aurobindo started simultaneously *The Secret of the Veda* and *The Life Divine* — the first and the last of the arches of the bridge of visioned thoughts that spans the history of Aryan culture, the inspired first beginnings and the culminating glorious fulfilment of the long and great spiritual traditions of India.

II

In recent years, Nirad C. Chaudhuri has put forward an amazing thesis in his controversial book, *The Continent of Circe* (1965): that the Aryan Hindus in India are descendents of the arrivals of long ago from Europe, from somewhere between the Danube and the Volga, via Persia, while the 'darks' are likewise the descendents of the aboriginals or survivals of the remote past. But the once 'fair' European-Aryan has now become the brown Hindu whom the climate of North India has enfeebled in body as well as mind. India is the "Continent of Circe", the enervating continent that has reduced the Aryan Hindus to their present swinish plight! It is the popular version of an Aryan invasion involving the struggle between Aryan and Dasyu, fair and dark — ending in the triumph of the former and the diminishing and retreating resistance of the latter — that has been

given by Nirad Chaudhuri this new twist, and it is complimentary neither to the rival races 'dark' and 'fair' nor to the country of their habitation or adoption. When Sri Aurobindo came to live in Pondicherry in South India and began observing the features of the people of the region, he was impressed by "the general recurrence of northern or 'Aryan' types in the Tamil race... not only among the Brahmins but in all castes and classes", and he couldn't escape the conclusion that, "whatever admixtures might have taken place, whatever regional differences might have been evolved, there remains, behind all variations, a unity of physical as well as of cultural type throughout India".⁷ From this it followed that the sharp distinction between 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' "created by the philologists" simply disappeared. Even as regards the supposed linguistic chasm, Sri Aurobindo found on closer scrutiny that many a Tamil vocable "not only suggested the connection (that is, between Sanskrit and its distant sisters, Latin and Greek) but proved the missing link in a family of connected words", leading to the further conclusion that "the original connection between the Dravidian and Aryan languages was far closer and more extensive than is usually supposed".⁸ If, then, neither physical characteristics nor linguistic variations offered unmistakable proof of the Aryan-Dravidian racial division of India, was it wise to read too much "history" into the Vedic hymns? After all, "there is no actual mention of any such invasion"; and such evidence

⁷ *On the Veda* (1956), pp. 43-4. (*On the Veda* is a one-volume collection of Sri Aurobindo's *The Secret of the Veda*, *Selected Hymns*, *Hymns of the Atris* and *Other Hymns*, which appeared serially in the *Arya* between August 1914 and January 1920).

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 45.

as we have points to "a cultural rather than a racial difference":

The language of the hymns clearly points to a particular worship or spiritual culture as the distinguishing sign of the Aryan, — a worship of Light and of the powers of Light and a self-discipline based on the culture of the "Truth" and the aspiration to Immortality, — *Ritam* and *Amritam*. There is no reliable indication of any racial difference.⁹

And so Sri Aurobindo took up the Veda in the original with a double interest: partly to weigh its value as pre-history, but chiefly to get at the heart of its meaning. And what were the results of this close and sustained inquiry? The supposed foreigner-native (Aryan-Dasyu) confrontation was hardly there in evidence. But the positive findings were exhilarating:

...far more interesting to me was the discovery of a considerable body of profound psychological thought and experience lying neglected in these ancient hymns. And the importance of this element increased in my eyes when I found, first, that the mantras of the Veda illuminated with a clear and exact light psychological experiences of my own for which I had found no sufficient explanation either in European psychology or in the teachings of Yoga or of Vedanta... and, secondly, that they shed light on obscure passages and ideas of the Upanishads to which, previously, I could attach no exact meaning and gave at the same time a new sense to much in the Puranas.¹⁰

In other words, he was now able to see the links between

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 30-1. ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 46.

Veda and Upanishad on the one hand, and on the other, between the Vedic world of dynamic symbolism and his own inner world of aspiration and spiritual effort.

In long past times, the Rishis had no doubt seized the whole sense of the Veda, but this sense has survived, not as a coherent or integral whole, but either as a congeries of forms in the *Brahmanas* or as scattered illuminations in the Upanishads without any systematic correlation with the many-patterned lights of the Veda:

The *Brahmanas* labour to fix and preserve the minutiae of the Vedic ceremony.... The Rishis of the Upanishads... used the text of the ancient mantras as a prop or an authority for their own intuitions and perceptions; or else the Vedic Word was a seed of thought and vision by which they recovered old truths in new forms.¹¹

If the *Brahmanas* helped to define the body of ritual (Karma Kanda, or Book of Works), the Upanishads led to Vedanta (Jnana Kanda, or Book of Knowledge). Notwithstanding these vicissitudes, the text of the Veda — “a text determined scrupulously to its very accentuation” — had been carefully preserved, and in course of time Yaska’s Lexicon (*Nirukta*) and Sayana’s Commentary (*Bhashya*) came to be composed as aids to the understanding of the Veda. Faced by the intertwining complexity and baffling multiplicity of ritualistic, mythological, psychological and naturalistic possibilities of interpretation, Sayana ignored none of them but placed the main emphasis on the ritualistic conception. The observation of the various rituals was to lead to specific material rewards like wealth, food, strength, power, progeny, horses, cows and servants, and also to the dis-

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 15-6.

confliture and destruction of the "enemies". The broad effect of Sayana was to shut in with a "double lock" the inner sense, the soul-sense, of the Veda; but at least it opened "the antechambers of Vedic learning" to posterity.¹²

Many centuries later, the Western scholar and his modern Indian counterpart tackled the Veda again, making full use of Sayana no doubt, but arriving at somewhat different conclusions:

In this new light the Vedic hymnology has come to be interpreted as a half-superstitious, half-poetic allegory of Nature with an important astronomical element. The rest is partly contemporary history, partly the formulae and practices of a sacrificial ritualism, not mystic, but merely primitive and superstitious.¹³

The Vedic researches of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and T. Paramasiva Aiyar and the attempt of Swami Dayanand to re-establish the Veda as the living religious scripture of the Arya Samaj were new developments that at least testified to the continued fascination exercised by the Veda on the modern mind. It was in this context that Sri Aurobindo's fresh studies, guided by his own inner light, led him to forge a new key to unlock the Veda's hidden treasures of spiritual Knowledge:

...the Veda has a double aspect... the two, though closely related, must be kept apart. The Rishis arranged the substance of their thought in a system of parallelism by which the same deities were at once internal and external Powers of universal Nature, and they managed its expression through a system of double values by which the same language served for their worship in both aspects. But the

¹² *ibid.*, p. 27. ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 29.

psychological sense predominates.... The Veda is primarily intended to serve for spiritual enlightenment and self-culture.¹⁴

To the physical ear, the Veda indeed speaks of a visible *yajña* or sacrifice, of ghee or clarified butter, of horse and cow, of dawn and night, and so on; but beyond these physical images lies the symbol-meaning meant for the "purified in soul and the awakened in knowledge". Sacrifice could be both outer offering and inner consecration; *ghṛta* could be clarified butter as well as dedicated thought or mind; and cow and horse could be those familiar animals as well as consciousness and force, or light and energy. The Vedic hymnists are naturalistic poets and ritualistic singers only so long as we choose to look no deeper. But once we have the clue, they stand revealed as mystics preoccupied with self-knowledge and a quintessential world-knowledge.

Having first won by their *tapasyā* the crown of Truth that was the light of immortal Bliss, the Vedic Rishis found it an ineffable and incommunicable felicity. But what they had seen and experienced, they wished also to describe for the benefit of others. Since everyday language was inadequate for this high purpose, they resorted to esoteric symbols and spiritual formulae. "Seer-words" were invented to contain the "seer-wisdoms", and the resulting language was "terse, knotted, virile, packed", following an inner compulsion of movement rather than the "smooth and careful constructions and the clear transitions of a logical and rhetorical syntax".¹⁵ The seminal idea the Rishis wished to convey was "the transition of the human soul from a state of death to a state of immortality by the exchange of the Falsehood for the

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 38. ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 420.

Truth, of divided and limited being for integrality and infinity".¹⁶ A change, a big change, a total change, and transformation was to be effected, but how? By means of a *yajña*, a sacrifice: by giving up falsehood, by scuttling the ignorance, by dying almost — so that rebirth in knowledge may be possible, so that the bliss of immortality may be won:

Our sacrifice is the offering of all our gains and works to the powers of the higher existence. The whole world is a dumb and helpless sacrifice in which the soul is bound as a victim self-offered to unseen Gods. The liberating Word must be found, the illuminating hymn must be framed in the heart and mind of man and his life must be turned into a conscious and voluntary offering in which the soul is no longer the victim, but the master of the sacrifice....

The image of this sacrifice is sometimes that of a journey or voyage.... It has to climb, led by the flaming strength of the divine Will... it has to cross as in a ship the waters of existence... its aim is to arrive at the far-off ocean of light and infinity.¹⁷

A journey and a struggle — no peaceful march, no easy battle, but a prolonged grappling with adverse forces without and within — the fight with the denizens of the Dark, their ultimate flight with the approach of the Dawn — the final conquest, the hymn of victory: in all this, there is a close correspondence between the drama on the outer theatre of the world and the drama on the inner theatre of the soul. Numberless too are the powers — divine and undivine — that get involved in the play:

...the vicissitudes of the human soul represent a

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 53. ¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 431-2.

cosmic struggle not merely of principles and tendencies but of the cosmic Powers which support and embody them. These are the Gods and the Demons. On the world-stage and in the individual soul the same real drama with the same personages is enacted....¹⁸

The soul of man is a world full of beings, a kingdom in which armies clash to help or hinder a supreme conquest, a house where the gods are our guests and which the demons strive to possess; the fullness of its energies and wideness of its being make a seat of sacrifice spread, arranged and purified for a celestial session.¹⁹

And so for every one at all times and in all climes the battle is joined. Man partly is and wholly hopes to be — and should be ready to fight and sacrifice if he is to become able to realise his hopes. When he aspires, he struggles too; and he invokes the assistance of the gods, he resists the tentacles of the demons, he fares forward, he dares the great climb, he reaches the highest heights. And so the Vedic drama is a drama that is ever renewed and is constantly concluded. Nothing is really out-of-date in the Veda, nothing is the abracadabra of wholly dead ritual. The Veda — when rightly understood in terms of Sri Aurobindo's interpretation — is of today as of all our yesterdays; it is about ourselves, it is the drama that is played in our hearts and souls; and the Vedic Rishis still speak to *us*, exhorting us to embark on the great adventure of spiritual ascension lifting us from our feeble human light and power to the puissance of an infinite Truth and an immortal Will:

So understood the Rig Veda ceases to be an obs-

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 434. ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 439.

cure, confused and barbarous hymnal; it becomes the high-aspiring Song of Humanity; its chants are episodes of the lyrical epic of the soul in its immortal ascension.²⁰

When Sri Aurobindo was engaged in uncoiling the knot of the Veda's meaning, he had to find the clues to the prescribed outer action or sacrifice, and their exact implications for the inner sacrifice or consecration: in other words, to discover the numerous correspondences between the cosmic system or the outer universe and the microcosmic world of the individual human entity. Sri Aurobindo found it sometimes convenient to work backwards from Purana to Upanishad and Upanishad to Veda, like tracking a known river to its mountainous source; and having done so, he was able to return refreshed in the springs of the primordial Fount to clarify and purify the lower reaches where the river of the Indian spiritual tradition had overspread itself or broken off into wandering trivial streams or lost itself in the desert sands of dead formalism and enslaving superstitions. Sri Aurobindo thus traced the origins of the Puranic and Vedantic seven-fold cosmic scheme (*satyaloka*, *tapoloka*, *janaloka*, *maharloka*, *sva*, *bhūvar*, *bhūr*) corresponding to the seven psychological principles or states of existence (*sat-cit-ānanda-vijñāna-manas-prāṇa-anna*) to the Vedic three-fold division, — Sat-chit-ananda above, Dyaus-antariksha-prithvi below, and the link-world of Supermind or Brihad-dyau of Satyam-ritam-brihat (Truth-Real-Vast). The seven planes of subjective consciousness were seen as the reflection within of the seven objective worlds without, a hierarchy of levels of human consciousness matching exactly a hierarchy or world-stair without;

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 439.

and the tremendous equation "the microcosm *is* the macrocosm" formed itself inevitably to explain the complex action and tantalising actors in the Vedic drama. It was clear the same Truth or Law sustained the universe without and the bud of the human soul within:

For as the Gods have built the series of the cosmic worlds, even so they labour to build up the same series of ordered states and ascending degrees in man's consciousness from the mortal condition to the crowning immortality... pure thought and feeling are man's sky, his heaven; this whole vitalistic existence of emotion, passions, affections of which desire is the pivot, forms for him a mid-world; body and material living are his earth... he has to break through and out beyond these firmaments of earth and heaven; conquering firm possession of the solar worlds, entering on to his highest Height he has to learn how to dwell in the triple principle of Immortality.²¹

III

Such is the Vedic vision, such the clarion call, such the promise of the possibility of man's self-transcendence and attainment of immortality. But Sri Aurobindo was not content with the brilliantly inspiring formulation of the thesis; he was also anxious to demonstrate its soundness in detail. This meant working out numerous parallelisms between the outer and the inner actions, piercing the crust of many a symbol to reach at the essential meaning, and above all embarking on the hazardous

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 428-9.

task of translating as many Hymns as possible into intelligible as well as effective English and bringing out wherever possible — in the notes or the commentaries — the inner structure of argument or stream of consciousness and relating it to the total Vedic world-view. During the first year of the *Arya*, along with 'The Secret of the Veda' sequence, some 'Selected Hymns' also appeared — thirteen in all — in translation, and each carried its own commentary. From August 1915 to January 1920, 'Hymns of the Atris' from the fifth Mandala and a few other Hymns also appeared in translation, with an explanatory Introduction on 'The Doctrine of the Mystics' and several important notes on the 'Guardians of the Light': Surya, Usha the Dawn, Pushan, Savitri, Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman and Bhaga. Long after the *Arya* had ceased publication, Sri Aurobindo published in 1946 *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, a new or revised translation of the Hymns to Agni in the second and sixth Mandalas. In 1952, an enlarged edition of *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* appeared, and this included Hymns from all the ten Mandalas except the ninth, some of those published earlier (like the 'Hymns of the Atris' from the fifth Mandala) now appearing in a revised form. In all about 175 of the Hymns to Agni are here in translation, and from these alone it should be possible to test the validity of Sri Aurobindo's broad conclusions regarding the esoteric meaning of the Veda. He had also planned an edition of the Rig Veda "or of a large part of it with a word for word construing in Sanskrit and English, notes explanatory of important points in the text and justifying the interpretation both of separate words and of whole verses and also elaborate appendices to fix firmly the rendering of key words like *ṛtam*, *śravas*, *kratu*, *ketu*, etc., essential to the eso-

teric interpretation", but greater "preoccupations of a permanent nature"—the demands of the supramental Yoga, the organisation of the Ashram, and the compulsions of the second world war—"intervened and no time was left to proceed with such a considerable undertaking".²²

Although many of the hymns are addressed to gods other than Agni—that is to say, Indra, Surya, Mitra, Varuna, Savitri, Soma, Brihaspati, the Ribbus, Usha, the Aswins, the Maruts, the Vishvedevas, Ila, Saraswati, Mahi, and so on—yet Agni is somehow the dominant deity in the Rig Veda. In the various Mandalas, the Suktas addressed to him are placed first, even Indra only following Agni. The very first Sukta in the first Mandala—the celebrated *Agnimile purohitam*—by Madhuchhandas (son of Vishvamitra) strikes as it were the keynote of the Scripture:

I adore the flame, the vicar, the divine Ritwik of the Sacrifice, the summoner who most finds the ecstasy.

The Flame adorable by the ancient sages is adorable too by the new. He brings here the Gods.

By the flame one enjoys a treasure that verily increases day by day, glorious, most full of hero-power.

O Flame! the pilgrim-sacrifice on every side of which thou art with the envisioning being, that truly goes among the Gods.

The Flame, the summoner, the Seer-Will, true and most full of richly varied listenings, may he come a God with the Gods....²³

A translation is but a translation, and Sri Aurobindo

²² *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* (1952), pp. xxiv-xxv. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 3.

himself was well aware of the limitations, especially when it was a question of turning the Vedic Riks into modern English:

...any rendering of such great poetry as the hymns of the Rig Veda, magnificent in their colouring and images, noble and beautiful in rhythm, perfect in their diction, must, if it is not to be a merely dead scholastic work, bring at least a faint echo of their poetic force....²⁴

The modern rendering cannot, under such circumstances, avoid "a looser, more diluted English form" than the concentrated speech of the Veda with its frequent recourse to *double entendre*. But on the whole — in this as in numerous other renderings — Sri Aurobindo has managed to bring out the sense as well as something of the relish of the original. But the near-ubiquitousness of Agni in these Hymns makes Sri Aurobindo himself pose the rhetorical question: "Who, then, is this god Agni to whom language of so mystic a fervour is addressed, to whom functions so vast and profound are ascribed"?²⁵ In one Hymn (II. i), Agni is addressed as Indra, Vishnu, Brahma, Rudra, Varuna, Twashtri, Pushan, Savitri, Bhaga, Ribhu, Aditi, Bharati, Ila and Saraswati! In another, again, there is this multiple-identification:

Thou art Varuna, O Fire, when thou art born,
thou becomest Mitra when thou blazest high; in
thee are all the gods, O son of Force, thou art
Indra for the mortal giver....²⁶

In another, the Rishi's vibrant voice is transmitted even in the English translation:

O Fire, we have sought thee with our adoration,

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. xxv-xxvi. ²⁵ *On the Veda*, p. 74.

²⁶ *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, p. 257 (V. 3).

bring hither Indra the rich in light, the beloved with his happy chariots to protect us....

Swing wide, O divine doors; be easy of approach that you may be our guard; lead further further and fill full our sacrifice....

May Ila, Saraswati, and Mahi, the three goddesses who create the bliss sit on the sacred seat, they who never err....

O Tree, there where thou knowest the secret names of the gods make rich our offerings.²⁷

And a few more Riks at random:

O Fire, companioning the shining ones bring to us Indra, companioning the Rudras bring vast Rudra, with the Adityas bring the boundless and universal Mother, with those who have the illumined word bring the master of the word in whom are all desirable things....²⁸

Found for us felicity of earth and heaven and universal life that we may worship thee with sacrifice, O god; O doer of works, may we keep close to thy perceptions of knowledge; guard us, O god, with thy wide utterances....²⁹

O Fire, we know the triple three of thee, we know thy seats borne widely in many planes, we know thy supreme Name which is in the secrecy, we know that front of things whence thou comest....³⁰

In these and hundreds of other Riks we see multi-missioned Agni with his myriad functions and chameleonic personality, and of course we feel puzzled.

The one sheet-anchor of unity is the Rik of Dirghatamas (I. 164. 46): *Ekam sat viprā bahudā vadanti*

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 265-6 (V. 5). ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 413 (VII. 10).

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 529. ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 549.

(Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni they call Him... the Existent is ONE, the sages call Him variously). And in the Rik (V. 3. 1) quoted above, there is this emphatic assertion: *In thee are all the gods, O son of Force!* So, then, there is reason to infer that Agni is really a seminal as well as an enveloping and omniscient Deity, a synonym almost for the One Existent in its drama of cosmic manifestation. Numberless, indeed, are the Vedic gods and goddesses, and they are more than mere names and symbols and attributes of the Supreme; rather are they substantial realities with their own powers and personalities that are so many divers manifestations of the Supreme Godhead. And as such these gods can find entry into the inner countries of the human heart and mind and soul and effect a divine alchemy. But Agni is of them all a God elect and eclectic and unique:

...of them there is one who is first to be born in man, to act as the Divine Messenger, who, while keeping himself in the front, in fact carries all the Gods in him, at the same time takes up the human soul along the path that leads to the Light, to the Truth, to Immortality — and that is the Divine Will, the Immortal in the mortal, the Flame Wonderful, Agni Adbhuta.³¹

This point is further emphasised by the so-called 'Apri' hymns that are a class apart, although rightly included among the hymns to Agni. They have their own inner structure. The deities mentioned in these hymns are clearly no more than Agni's chameleonic impersonations in the course of his progress in the inner life of the

³¹ T.V. Kapali Sastry, *Further Lights: The Veda and the Tantra* (1951), p. 72.

litanist-Rishi. As Kapali Sastry has pointed out:

While the Apri hymns are used in the ritual as a preliminary to the animal sacrifice, its significance in the inner life of the Rishi is quite clear in that it invokes the help and presence of the Gods whose advent is vouchsafed to the Rishi by the progressive unfoldment of the powers of Agni himself.³²

Of the other insights scattered in Sri Aurobindo's essays on the Veda, there is not space enough here to speak at length. Everywhere he has brought his own illumined mind to dispel the obscurity in symbolism or clear up the ambiguity in phrasing. Varuna and Mitra are Powers of the Truth that compel the human mentality to burst through its egoistic shell and take a leap towards the supramental godheads. Indra is a giver of Light, "Mind-power released from the limits and obscurations of the nervous consciousness". Vayu is the Lord of Life. Saraswati represents *śruti* (truth-audition), Ila represents *dr̥ṣṭi* (truth-vision), and Mahi (or Bharati) the largeness of the Truth-consciousness. Sarama the 'Hound of Heaven' and her dogs, the Sarameya, have their symbolic overtones too:

These dogs... range as the messengers of the Lord of the Law among men.... Whether Sarama figures as the fair-footed goddess speeding on the path or the heavenly hound, mother of these wide-ranging guardians of the path, the idea is the same, a power of the Truth that seeks and discovers, that finds by a divine faculty of insight the hidden Light and the denied Immortality.³³

The "seven rivers" mentioned in Vishvamitra's Hymn to Agni (III.i) are not physical rivers but "the seven strands

³² *ibid.*, p. 79. ³³ *On the Veda*, pp. 253-4.

of all being, the seven streams or currents or forms of movement of the one conscious existence".³⁴ Usha the Dawn too is much more than the physical dawn, as in III.61.5:

Meet ye the Dawn as she shines wide towards you and with surrender bring forward your complete energy. Exalted in heaven is the force to which she rises establishing the sweetness; she makes the luminous worlds to shine forth and is a vision of felicity.³⁵

In his commentary, Sri Aurobindo says:

Throughout the Veda, Usha daughter of Heaven... is the medium of the awakening, the activity and growth of the other gods; she is the first condition of the Vedic realisation.³⁶

But Dawn also alternates with her sister Night, and "darkness itself is a mother and always Dawn comes to reveal what the black-browed Mother has prepared".³⁷ The cow, again, is concealed or imprisoned wealth, the light of the Sun hidden in the darkness, which has to be uncovered and released by a divine show of force. The Angirasa is a seer, an Agni-power, and a Brihaspati-power besides; the "seven Angirases" represent "different principles of Knowledge. Thought or Word harmonised in a universal Knowledge". The Aswins are "lords of bliss... they seek the honey, the sweetness and fill all things with it". Here is Vamadeva's Rik (IV.45.2):

Full of honey upward rise the delight; upward horses and cars in the wide-shinings of the Dawn and they roll aside the veil of darkness that encompassed on every side and they extend the lower

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 135. ³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 335.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 336.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 311.

world into a shining form like that of the luminous heaven.³⁸

Surya Savitri is the divine Creator (V.81.4):

And thou reachest, O Savitri, to the three shining worlds of heaven; and thou art made manifest by the rays of the Sun; and thou encirclest the Might upon either side; and thou becomest the lord of Love (Mitra) by the law of thy actions, O God. The Ribhus are the "artisans of Immortality", Vishnu is the all-pervading godhead, Soma is Lord of delight and also the divine food. As for the conquest of the Panis or the Dasyus by the Aryans, "it is clear that these Pani Dasyus are crooked powers of the falsehood and ignorance who set their false knowledge, their false strength, will and works against the true knowledge, the true strength, will and works of the gods and the Aryans". What is described is no engagement on the field of battle but an inner struggle and a victory in self-culture. And summing up the central Vedic conception, Sri Aurobindo concludes that the great aim "is the conquest of the Truth out of the darkness of Ignorance and by the conquest of the Truth the conquest also of Immortality".³⁹

With a body of inspired poetry as ancient and as opulent and as symbol-ridden as the Rig Veda, it would be too much to claim that Sri Aurobindo's interpretative insights and experiments in translation have laid bare *all* that was "still hidden" at the time he commenced his Vedic studies in depth. His work was continued by T. V. Kapali Sastry in his Sanskrit treatise, *Siddhanjana*, and by A. B. Purani in his *Sri Aurobindo's Vedic Glossary* (1962), but a definitive edition of the kind Sri Aurobindo had planned but could not undertake remains

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 371. ³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 277-8.

a desideratum still. On the other hand, it can hardly be denied that at Sri Aurobindo's touch the Veda has once again leapt into life as a supreme spiritual and poetic treasure that wings us back to the dreams and splendorous insights of humanity's enlightened Dawn. Certainly, Sri Aurobindo has succeeded in unveiling the esoteric meaning of numberless Riks and also of the Rig Veda as a whole. We can now read his renderings of the invocations to the Mystic Fire and rediscover in them with a continual stir of excitement the ineluctable strains of the Spirit. Always, Light and Truth and Immortality are the Vedic hymnists' quarry. Visible material sacrifice is but a screen for the inner spiritual sacrifice which is a travel towards the gods; and Agni the inner Flame, the steady Will, is our pathfinder and leader. The dynamics of the movement are such that the Flame both raises the pilgrim-soul to heaven and brings the heavens down to him. As he battles his way through the mists of the lower mentality and the storms of egoistic desire, man is led by the Flame that is Agni to the shining tablelands of Truth to partake of the Divine Food of Soma. The goal and the journey, the ardour and the discipline, the fret and the fever of the battle as well as the consummation and fulfilment of the victory, all come to us with the immediacy of a drama that has involved us also in its action. The physical is lost in the supra-physical, the Word and the Mantra come to us from the immaculate Sphota, the Vak, the immutable Sabda Brahman; and the symbolic spiritual drama invariably climaxes in the seizure of the shining gold of Truth that is also the guerdon of Immortality. It need hardly be added that the Vedic stairway of the worlds and chains of parallelism between the cosmic and the

microcosmic universes, the Vedic complex of multiple imagery and symbolism, and above all the Vedic recipe for the elixir of Immortality were constantly in Sri Aurobindo's mind when he wrote *The Life Divine* and the modern "Divine Comedy", *Savitri*.⁴⁰

IV

Sri Aurobindo's commentaries on the Isha and Kena Upanishads appeared originally in the *Arya* in 1914-5 and 1915-6 respectively. These are complementary essays in interpretation that are relevant to the understanding of Sri Aurobindo's thought as much as to the understanding of the Upanishads. A careful reading of the Isha commentary has led R. S. Mugali to the conclusion that Sri Aurobindo "might have obtained in this Upanishad the thought-seed which later grew up into the vast tree of his perfect life-vision" and became *The Life Divine*.⁴¹ The Isha has but eighteen stanzas, and its method is illumination through a series of diamond-edged affirmations of an extreme and paradoxical brevity; and this Upanishad too ends with an invocation to the Mystic Fire: "O god Agni, knowing all things that are manifested, lead us by the good path to the felicity". Sri Aurobindo sees the central idea of the Upanishad as "a reconciliation and harmony of fundamental opposites": the conscious Lord and phenomenal Nature, renunciation and enjoyment, action in Nature and the soul's freedom,

⁴⁰ For further light on the question the reader is referred to V. Chandrasekharam's 'Sri Aurobindo and the Veda' in *Sri Aurobindo: Three Essays* (1961).

⁴¹ M. P. Pandit *50th Birthday Commemoration Volume* (1968), p.81.

the one stable Brahman and the multiple movement, the state of Being and the dynamics of Becoming, the active Lord and the indifferent Akshara Brahman, Vidya and Avidya, birth and non-birth, Works and Knowledge. If "all this is for habitation of the Lord", it is only through the awakening of the consciousness of such constant Divine participation that the individual can escape from the bondage of egoistic desire. To renounce the prison-house of the ego is to gain the sovereignty of the universe — to renounce wisely is verily to live a hundred years *here*, nor feel the burden or taint of action. To move out of the ego's cabinning categories is to be able to see the One in everything and everything in the One and live the truth that "the microcosm *is* the macrocosm". How, then, can one suffer division, isolation or defeat? They must cease! Of the stages of such self-realisation, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The first movement of self-realisation is the sense of unity with other existences in the universe. Its early or crude form is the attempt to understand or sympathise with others, the tendency of a widening love.... The oneness so realised is a pluralistic unity.... The Many remain to the consciousness as the real existences; the One is only their result.

Real knowledge begins with the perception of essential oneness. — one Matter, one Life, one Mind, one Soul playing in many forms.

When this Soul of things is seen to be Sachchidananda, then knowledge is perfected. For we see Matter to be only a play of Life. Life a play of Mind... Mind a play of Truth... Truth a play of Sachchidananda. Sachchidananda the self-manifestation of a supreme Unknowable....

We perceive the soul in all bodies to be this one Self or Sachchidananda multiplying itself in individual consciousness....

This is the vision of all existences in the Self and of the Self in all existences....⁴²

But Sachchidananda is also the Lord: in its impersonal infinite existence it is That, but when it is self-aware and self-blissful it is He. The human soul too has this double term to its existence — only, being at first involved in the Ignorance, it has to outgrow it and learn to engage in Works without being attached to them or limited by them. Neither in the extremities of the negations nor in the one-sided affirmations of birth and non-birth lies the way of wisdom. One has to pierce the golden lid of apparent truth (which is really falsehood) to see the real Truth:

O Fosterer, O sole Seer, O Ordainer, O illuminating Sun, O power of the Father of creatures, marshal thy rays, draw together thy light; the Lustre which is thy most blessed form of all, that in Thee I behold. The Purusha there and there, He am I.

Sri Aurobindo's comment is itself a tearing of the veil of the beautiful verse to get at the meaning coiled within:

By the revelation of the vision of Surya the true knowledge is formed.... First, there is an arrange-

⁴² *Isha Upanishad* (5th edition, 1951), pp. 62-3. At different times, Sri Aurobindo seems to have written different commentaries on the Isha, from different points of view. Some of these are included in Vol. XII of the Centenary Edition. Of especial interest must be the 64-page piece, 'The Ishavasyopanishad', the Upanishad being here turned into a Platonic dialogue between Guru and Student.

ment or marshalling of the rays of Surya, that is to say, the truths concealed behind our concepts and percepts are brought out by separate intuitions of the image and the essence of the image and arranged in their true relations to each other.... The mind can hardly conceive unity except as an abstraction, a sum or a void. Therefore it has to be gradually led from its own manner to that which exceeds it.... Thus by the action of Surya we arrive at that light of the supreme super-conscious in which even the intuitive knowledge of the truth of things based upon the total vision passes into the self-luminous self-vision of the one existent.... This is Surya's godliest form of all.... This is the Lord, the Purusha.⁴³

If Surya is invoked to bring about the necessary inner illumination, Agni is likewise invoked to back knowledge with the will to right action, for knowledge is incomplete without action. The double emergence of Surya's Light and Agni's Will is thus the condition precedent to the winning of immortality. One of the early scriptures and "certainly the most antique of the extant metrical Upanishads", the *Isha* is full of Vedic overtones and is governed by the "spiritual pragmatism" of the Rishis. Don't deny the Spirit, don't reject material existence on earth, but make this life itself the field of probation for the conquest of immortality which alone should be the aim of human endeavour.⁴⁴

The Kena is rather longer than the Isha and is cast

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 135-7.

⁴⁴ The reader is also referred to C.C. Dutt's article on 'Sri Aurobindo and the Isha Upanishad' in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, No. 2 (1943).

in a dramatic mould; and unlike the grand affirmation *isāvasyam idam sarvam* in the opening verse of the Isha, here the Upanishad starts with a string of questions:

By whom missioned falls the mind shot to its mark? By whom yoked does the first life-breath move forward on its paths? By whom impelled is this word that men speak? What god set eye and ear to their workings?

If the Isha is the elaboration of a seminal affirmation, the Kena is the formulation of a definitive answer to a particular series of questions. What is the ground of understanding? Where is the true source of the divers activities of the mind, life-force, speech and the sensory faculties? The power of thinking — of nervous life-energy — of speech — of sensory cognition is exercised by many, and similar results flow from the exercise; isn't there, then, a source Mind, a source life-energy, a source sensibility? We might equate these with the god-heads Indra, Vayu, Agni; dare one think that these gods at least are sovereign in their respective realms?

In the latter part of the Upanishad, the story is told of Brahman the Eternal winning a victory for the gods. But the gods knew not Brahman, and therefore attributed the victory to themselves. Suddenly they had a sense of the presence of That, and "they could not discern of That, what was this mighty Daemon". Agni was sent out to inquire, but put to the test by That, he was unable by his effort alone to burn even a blade of grass. He returned in discomfiture, and now Vayu went on the same errand, and with the same result:

That set before him a blade of grass; "This take". He went towards it with all his speed and he could not take it. Even there he ceased, even

thence he returned; "I could not discern of That, what is this mighty Daemon".

Last went Indra, but in the place of That he found only Uma of the snowy summits from whom he learnt that it was Brahman who had teased and contained them all. To have knowledge of the Brahman is to be overwhelmed by Delight, *taddha tadvanam nāma*; the name of That is "That Delight".

In one of the Mother's prayers (30 September 1914), there is a reference to the gods Agni, Indra and Soma, followed by an invocation to a still higher power:

...Agni assures us of the cooperation of his purifying flame.... Indra is with us to perfect the illumination in our knowledge, and the divine Soma has transformed us into his infinite, sovereign, marvellous love, that begets the supreme beatitudes....

And Thou, O Lord, who art all that in one and yet much more, Thou sovereign Master, extreme limit of our thought, who standest for us on the threshold of the Unknown, let some new splendour surge out of that Unthinkable, some possibility of a higher and more integral realisation, so that Thy work may be accomplished and the supreme may take one more step forward towards the sublime identification, the supreme manifestation.⁴⁵

The Kena is mainly preoccupied with the problem of consciousness, the stair of consciousness, and the need to batter one's way through the barrier between the limited divisive lower and the inclusive all-puissant all-powerful Brahman-consciousness. The life we live, the thoughts we think, the words we speak are not the highest possible; they are but the crude and perverse forma-

⁴⁵ *Prayers and Meditations of the Mother* (1948), pp. 195-7.

tions which, however, contain the infinitely purer and nobler possibilities, and our aspiration and action should be directed to the realisation of these possibilities. Nor is Brahman-consciousness a getting away from here; its action will tend rather to the transfiguration of the lower consciousness. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

The language of the Upanishad makes it strikingly clear that it is no metaphysical abstraction, no void of Silence, no indeterminate Absolute which is offered to the soul that aspires, but rather the absolute of all that is possessed by it here in the relative world of its sojourning. All here in the mental is a growing light, consciousness and life; all there in the supramental is an infinite life, light and consciousness. That which is here shadowed, is there found; the incomplete here is there fulfilled. The Beyond is not an annulation, but a transfiguration of all that we are here in our world of forms; it is sovran Mind of this mind, secret Life of this life, the absolute Sense which supports and justifies our limited senses....

It is not by abandoning life on earth... it is here, *ihaiva*, in this mortal life and body that immortality must be won, here in this lower Brahman and by this embodied soul that the Higher must be known and possessed.⁴⁶

This makes the *Kena* too stand witness to the validity of the principal spiritual insights woven into the texture of *The Life Divine*.

⁴⁶ *Kena Upanishad* (1952), pp. 27, 95. The interested reader may refer also to T.V. Kapali Sastry's article on 'Sri Aurobindo and the Kena Upanishad' included in his *Lights on the Ancients* (1954).

V

Sri Aurobindo saw the Veda, the Upanishads and the Gita as a grand succession of syntheses of all current and previous spiritual experience and speculative thought on the issue of right action here and now. The crown of the Vedic synthesis was the visioned possibility and experienced actuality of man's self-transcendence towards divine heights through the invocation and intervention of the powers of the cosmic godheads. The Upanishadic Seers started where the Vedic Rishis had left, and Vedanta or the Veda's culmination meant a determined movement from the defective and divisive mental to the Brahman-consciousness. The Gita carried this dynamic of synthesis a step further in consonance with the needs and spirit of the Heroic or Epic Age:

The Gita starts from this Vedantic synthesis and upon the basis of its essential ideas builds another harmony of the three great means and powers, Love, Knowledge, and Works, through which the soul of man can directly approach and cast itself into the Eternal.⁴⁷

Sri Aurobindo's *The Secret of the Veda* and his commentaries on the Isha and Kena Upanishads concluded in the *Arya* of July 1916, and his *Essays on the Gita* commenced in August 1916 and came to an end in July 1920. There was thus a logic in this magisterial movement from Veda and Upanishad to the Gita, — and together these commentaries constitute Sri Aurobindo's monumental attempt to correlate past spiritual experiences and philosophical formulations — along with other

⁴⁷ *Essays on the Gita* (Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education Collection: 1959), p. 10.

intervening syntheses like the Tantra — with his own inner realisations and their intellectual formulation in the work simultaneously in progress, *The Life Divine*. While his own realisations gave him the central inspiration and ambience of certainty, nevertheless he found in the Veda, Upanishads and the Gita valuable hints for the structuring of *The Life Divine*; nor did he make any secret about it, for the epigraphs to the chapters tell their own tale, and so do these commentaries that appeared alongside of that treatise in the *Arya*.

The Gita, holding as it does a pivotal place in India's scriptural literature, has been stretched on many a doctrinal Procrustes' Bed, and trimmed or extended to fit its exacting dimensions. In modern times, Lokamanya Tilak has expounded the Gita as a Gospel of Karma Yoga, and Mahatma Gandhi has been able to read into it his own Ahimsa Yoga. Sri Aurobindo's aim in his *Essays on the Gita* was not to add one more scholastic study or doctrinal tract to the existing Himalayan heap, but to discover and present the essential message separated from the merely local and temporal. In words that, now and then, cease to be merely words but vibrate like a flotilla of the spirit, Sri Aurobindo has set forth in his *Essays* the ancient and perennial and forever pertinent wisdom of the Gita, "the living message it still brings for man the eternal seeker and discoverer to guide him through the present circuits and the possible steeper ascent of his life up to the luminous heights of his spirit".⁴⁸

If the Gita is a great manual of spiritual philosophy, it is also philosophy with a difference: the teacher is a divine personality, the pupil is his comrade and kinsman, and the occasion is the moment of a sanguinary clash of

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 777.

arms. Arjuna and Krishna have been compared to Nara and Narayana, who do *tapasyā* together, and to the two birds of the Rig Veda (I.164.20) that cling to a common tree, one eating the sweet fruit, the other unregarding and silent:

Arjuna and Krishna, this human and this divine, stand together not as seers in the peaceful hermitage of meditation, but as fighter and holder of the reins in the clamorous field, in the midst of the hurtling shafts, in the chariot of battle.⁴⁹

The fighter, Arjuna, suddenly and inexplicably acts most unheroically; he declines to fight and kill the "enemy", who are really his own kinsmen and elders and preceptors. The fighter will not fight! Such is the extraordinary existential situation of the Gita.

The drama of the Arjuna-Krishna dialectic spans the eighteen chapters of the Gita and comprises three high arches of wide-glancing reasoning. But in the Gita's integral vision, the three arches — Works, Knowledge, Love — make a single Bridge of Transcendence and Realisation, for it leads the puzzled Arjuna (and all such Naras) from irresolution to determination, from bewilderment to enlightenment, from distraction to love and surrender. The quality of Works will be a function of the Knowledge sustaining them, and when Knowledge is lit by an absolute Love, Works-Knowledge-Love become a triune blaze of realisation. As the colloquy between Arjuna and Krishna unfolds in the background of the great armies drawn up in battle-array, many a philosophical concept, many a specious argument, many a familiar stance of sensibility come up to be tossed into the widening sweep of the dialectic, and Arjuna is helped to

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 23.

breast the waves — half understanding half confused — till he safely comes through at last and is ready to engage in battle, not merely as an Aryan fighter who has been awakened to the call of his dharma, but even more as one lit up by the higher knowledge and charged with irresistible power by the mystical tremendum of the assurance of the Lord's absolute protection. The systems of Sankhya and Yoga and Vedanta, the ideal of Works as Sacrifice to the gods and to the supreme Divine, the determinism of Nature, the concepts of *svabhāva* and *svadharma*, the purpose of Avatarhood, the poise needed for the Divine Worker, the three Gunas and the two Natures and the three Purushas (Kshara, Akshara and Purushottama), the divine Vibhūtis and the Vision of the World-Spirit, these and many other themes are taken up, dropped, taken up again and tossed and whirled and fused into the final revelation and exhortation and benediction: "Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone. I shall deliver thee from all sin and evil, do not grieve". Sri Aurobindo's commentary too partakes of all the sinuousness and self-assurance of the Lord's winding and winging Song, and the explication and exposition are illumined off and on by the lightning-streaks of Aurobindonian imagery, and the great truths of the Gita, its hidden layers of thought and experience, its profound poetic symbolism, all are gathered into this eloquent contemporaneous re-statement of India's ancient testament of spiritual philosophy. And even before he wrote *Essays on the Gita*, it was with the Gita's teaching that Sri Aurobindo — during his political days — had "vitalised the sinews of India and illumined its darkened soul".⁵⁰

⁵⁰ V. Chandrasekharam, *Sri Aurobindo: Three Essays*, p. 9.

Early in his *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo brilliantly sums up the teaching in a single paragraph:

The argument of the *Gita* resolves itself into three great steps by which action rises out of the human into the divine plane leaving the bondage of the lower for the liberty of a higher law. First, by the renunciation of desire and a perfect equality, works have to be done as a sacrifice by man as the doer, a sacrifice to a deity who is the supreme and only Self, though by him not yet realised in his own being. This is the initial step. Secondly, not only the desire of the fruit, but the claim to be the doer of works has to be renounced in the realisation of the Self as the equal, the inactive, the immutable principle and of all works as simply the operation of universal Force, of the Nature-Soul. Prakriti, the unequal, active, mutable power. Lastly, the supreme Self has to be seen as the supreme Purusha governing this Prakriti, of whom the soul in Nature is a partial manifestation, by whom all works are directed, in a perfect transcendence, through Nature. To Him love and adoration and the sacrifice of works have to be offered; the whole being has to be surrendered to Him and the whole consciousness raised up to dwell in this divine consciousness so that the human soul may share in His divine transcendence of Nature and of His works and act in a perfect spiritual liberty.⁵¹

Quite obviously, the *Gita* in its immediate intention is a call to "action". Arjuna has to be made to take up his Gandiva again and fight the hosts ranged in front of him. But any action could be effective only if based on con-

⁵¹ *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 49-50.

viction and commitment. Nishkama karma ("desireless action"), certainly; but this is, at best, a negative capability. The positive stance would be to turn action into sacrifice or *yajña*. "The whole of the Gita's gospel of works", says Sri Aurobindo, "rests upon its idea of sacrifice and contains in fact the eternal connecting truth of God and the world and works".⁵² The first six Books of the Gita, forming as they do "a sort of preliminary block of the teaching", describe this phenomenon of sacrifice in relation, not only to Karma, but also Jnana and Bhakti, although these are to receive fuller treatment only in the subsequent Books. For Krishna, it is not simply a question of making Arjuna fight, but charging him with a new sense of power and purpose. As an avatar, Krishna has both to enact the Divine manifestation and to effect Arjuna's upliftment to a higher — to the divine — level. The very purpose of the Avatar is to demonstrate that the divine essence *can* be housed in humanity with all the limitations of that material tenement:

The Avatar is always a dual phenomenon of divinity and humanity; the Divine takes upon himself the human nature with all its outward limitations and makes them the circumstances, means and instruments of the divine consciousness and the divine power, a vessel of the divine birth and the divine works... the object of the Avatar's descent... is precisely to show that the human birth with all its limitations can be made such a means and instrument of the divine birth and divine works, precisely to show that the human type of consciousness can be compatible with the divine essence of consciousness made manifest, can be converted into its vessel, drawn into

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 167.

nearer conformity with it by a change of its mould and a heightening of its powers of light and love and strength and purity.⁵³

The reasoning is that, if the Divine can descend into humanity, humanity too can ascend to the Divine heights:

...there are two aspects of the divine birth; one is a descent, the birth of God in humanity, the Godhead manifesting itself in the human form and nature, the eternal Avatar; the other is an ascent, the birth of man into the Godhead, man rising into the divine nature and consciousness, *madbhavan agatah*; it is the being born anew in a second birth of the soul. It is that new birth which Avatarhood and the upholding of the Dharma are intended to serve.⁵⁴

The aim of Krishna the Avatar is to raise the man Arjuna to the level of a 'superman' deploying a divine consciousness and a divine energy and drive — not a Nietzschean, Olympian, Apollonian or Dionysian 'superman', but a man "whose whole personality has been offered up into the being, nature and consciousness of the one transcendent and universal Divinity and by loss of the smaller self has found its greater self".⁵⁵

The commentary on the first six Books takes up 24 of the 48 chapters of *Essays on the Gita*, but already some of the leading ideas of the later Books of the Gita have been touched upon and the strands have been woven into the tapestry of the unfolding narrative. Jnana and Bhakti receive fresh emphasis now, but indeed it is idle to compartmentalise what is, after all, a single massive cataract of revelation. If right Knowledge gives a new dimension to Action, right Devotion likewise charges

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 221. ⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 199. ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

Knowledge itself with a new vibrancy and power. What is the clue to the mingling and melting together of Works, Knowledge and Love to flow onward as infallible irresistible existential action? What is the king-knowledge (Raja-Vidya), the king-science (Raja-Guhya), the right and just knowledge and the very law of our being? The secret of secrets is, says Krishna, that the Divine is in *each* individual being or thing, in *all* beings and things, and also transcends the entire phantasmagoria of the phenomenal play. To seize this "secret of secrets" is to be able to batter one's way out of one's egoistic prison-house and function from a greater wideness, the ego being dissolved in the "impersonality of spiritual being". This in turn must facilitate a Divine orientation for all actions, all thoughts, all loves. In one sense, not the ego, but Prakriti or Nature is the doer of all works; but Prakriti is only a power of the Being or Purusha who is the master and controller of all her multitudinous works and million-faceted energisms. The supreme rule of life is thus categorical and clear:

...since his works are that Being's, he has to give up all his actions to the Godhead in him and the world, by whom they are done in the divine mystery of Nature. This is the double condition of the divine birth of the soul, of its release from the mortality of the ego and the body into the spiritual and eternal — knowledge first of one's timeless immutable self and union through it with the timeless Godhead, but knowledge too of that which lives behind the riddle of the Cosmos.... Here is the place of Bhakti in the scheme of the Yoga of an integral self-liberation. It is an adoration and aspiration towards that which is greater than imperishable self or changing Nature.

All knowledge then becomes an adoration and aspiration, but all works too become an adoration and aspiration. Works of nature and freedom of soul are unified in this adoration, and become one self-uplifting to the one Godhead.⁵⁶

After such knowledge translated into a continuum of sacrificial offering in a spirit of pure adoration, where is the room for ambiguity in aim or uncertainty in action? *Vāsudevaḥ sarvamīti*: in His will is our peace, in His Grace is our happiness.

Arjuna with Krishna beside him wonders: the words are certainly from his friend and comrade — but what else *is* he, what *is* he? He has put such authority into his words — words that are battle-cries as well as seer-wisdoms — as if he *knows*, as if he *is* what he has been describing. Can he Arjuna, can he the Nara, see *that* also, — see, see with his physical eyes, Krishna's, Nara-yana's, total Form-Substance, his *viśvarūpa*? He at last ventures to ask: "Let me see your real Form, your Ishwara-Form, O Yogeshwara!" Krishna has now no option but to reveal his real self, or rather he gives Arjuna the suprasensuous sight to glimpse the terrible and tremendous and all-inclusive Ishwara-Form behind the human form. And here we come to the most inspired and most powerfully evocative passage in Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*:

The supreme Form is then made visible. It is that of the infinite Godhead whose faces are everywhere and in whom are all the wonders of existence, who multiplies unendingly all the many marvellous revelations of his being, a world-wide Divinity seeing with innumerable eyes, speaking from

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 412.

innumerable mouths, armed for battle with numberless divine uplifted weapons, glorious with divine ornaments of beauty, robed in heavenly raiment of deity, lovely with garlands of divine flowers, fragrant with divine perfumes. Such is the light of this body of God as if a thousand Suns had risen at once in heaven. The whole world multitudinously divided and yet unified is visible in the body of the God of Gods. Arjuna sees him, God magnificent and beautiful and terrible, the Lord of souls who has manifested in the glory and greatness of his spirit this wild and monstrous and orderly and wonderful and sweet and terrible world, and overcome with marvel and joy and fear he bows down and adores with words of awe and with clasped hands the tremendous vision.⁵⁷

It would be an understatement to say that Arjuna is overwhelmed; what happens to him is something more elemental. As Krishnaprem puts it in a letter to Govinda Gopal:

Why did it terrify Arjuna? Because the *viśvarupa* is death to the ego and all fear of death. The ego is false and all that is false must die in the fire of Truth.⁵⁸

Arjuna is thus greatly relieved to see Krishna again in his familiar human form, *mānuṣam rupam*; but the memory of the all-in-one Form cannot fade away.

Now at long last the way is clear for the definitive enunciation of the dynamic of the Yoga of Devotion, Bhakti Yoga. As one scales higher and higher in Karma Yoga, first the clear light of Knowledge makes for de-

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 512-3.

⁵⁸ Quoted in *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem* by Dilip Kumar Roy (1968).

tachment and even vision in the doing of action, then the power of Love makes for pure joy in the action, and all culminate in the perfect and blissful surrender to the Divine and union with Him—and henceforth the Divine becomes, in fact, the doer of the action. To progress in the Gita's integral Yoga is thus to get beyond the shackles of the *gunas* (tamas, rajas, sattwa), beyond the fourfold order of society, and beyond all other limitations as well. And so Krishna gives his closing supreme Word in just two verses (XVII. 65-6):

Become my-minded, my lover and adorer, a sacrificer to Me, bow thyself to Me, to Me thou shalt come, this is my pledge and promise to thee, for dear thou art to Me.

Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone. I shall deliver thee from all sin and evil, do not grieve.

The last chapter summarises the message of the Gita, and these pages contain the cream of the book and of the Gita as well. We are led by slow gradations to the peremptory all-dissolving exhortation:

This then is the supreme movement, this complete surrender of your whole self and nature, this abandonment of all dharmas to the Divine who is your highest Self, this absolute aspiration of all your members to the supreme spiritual nature. If you can once achieve it, whether at the outset or much later on the way, then whatever you are or were in your outward nature, your way is sure and your perfection inevitable. A supreme Presence within you will take up your Yoga and carry it swiftly along the lines of your *svabhāva* to its consummate completion. And afterwards whatever your

way of life and mode of action, you will be consciously living, acting and moving in him and the Divine Power will act through you in your every inner and outer motion.⁵⁹

Since its first publication in book form in 1922, *Essays on the Gita* has been frequently reprinted, and it is perhaps the most widely read of Sri Aurobindo's major prose works; and, undoubtedly, it is both preparation and corroboration for *The Life Divine*. And the sweep of its comprehension, the resilience of its argument, the brilliance of its Nara-Narayana portraiture and the steady flow and sustained glow of its language secure for the work a place of special honour among the great Commentaries on the world's greatest poem of spiritual philosophy.

⁵⁹ *Essays on the Gita*, pp. 808-9. The reader is referred also to Anilbaran Roy's article on 'Sri Aurobindo and the Gita' in *Sri Aurobindo Annual*, Number 1 (1942), his edition of the Gita with translation and Notes compiled from *Essays on the Gita* and his *The Message of the Gita* (as interpreted by Sri Aurobindo).

CHAPTER TWENTY

MAN AND COLLECTIVE MAN

I

We have seen that Sri Aurobindo made a move in February 1910 from Calcutta to Chandernagore and in April from Chandernagore to Pondicherry in answer to an *ades*, an unmistakable inner command; and both during the few weeks at Chandernagore and during the first years at Pondicherry, he devoted himself entirely to "silent Yoga", with a view to consolidating the gains of his *sadhana* and working out their practical implications for the larger life of humanity. He had, indeed, retired from active political participation, and cut off his connection with political leaders and movements in Bengal and India. But this did not mean that he had retreated to an inaccessible Silence or contrived an insulation from the currents of everyday actuality. On the other hand, it was basic to his Yoga that he should include within the scope of his spiritual action, not only himself, but all life and all world activity as well. He was still aware of the winds blowing about although not enslaved by them, and he was continually deploying his attention to the drift of world affairs and the course of human destiny — but from the vantage point of his achieved higher consciousness. It was not as though he had shut out from his mind the whole problem of India's fight for independence: that couldn't be; only, it had now become part of the larger problem of human destiny itself — the triple problem of man's individual, his social and his racial destiny.

Before Mirra Richard (the Mother) came to Pondicherry to meet Sri Aurobindo in March 1914, she had already traversed — as we saw earlier — a similar spiritual path, and she had recorded in 1912 that the aim to be attained was the realisation of human unity by “founding the Kingdom of God which is within us all”; and this was to be achieved through the twin processes of individual and social transformation.¹ As she saw it, man the individual, society or the human aggregate, and the race or the human totality were three interlinked terms of the supreme problem of establishing a universal harmony; and the master-key to the solution lay in “the manifestation by all of the inner Divinity which is One”. When, sometime after their meeting, Sri Aurobindo and the Richards decided to launch the *Arya* and its French counterpart, the aim was really to carry out one of the objectives she had earlier formulated: “To speak again to the world the eternal word under a new form adapted to its present mentality... the synthesis of all human knowledge”.² *The Life Divine*, *The Psychology of Social Development* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* were Sri Aurobindo’s separate utterances of “the eternal word”, as applied to the individual, the social or communal group and the global human family respectively. *The Life Divine* began with the first issue of the *Arya* in August 1914; *Human Unity* started more than a year later in September 1915, and *Social Development* two years later in August 1916; and after running together for two more years, they both concluded in July 1918, and *The Life Divine* itself came to an end six months later in January 1919. It may thus be said that the three works unfolded themselves almost simultaneously,

¹ *Words of the Mother* (3rd edition: 1946), pp. 5-6. ² *ibid.*, p. 6.

that they were one Testament, one Manifesto — “the eternal word” — though uttered each time with a different emphasis. In another sense, *The Life Divine* was the seminal statement, the Grand Theorem, and the other two were but corollaries, significant reverberations, or necessary extensions. And this is amply borne out by such a passage as the following from the last chapter of *The Life Divine*:

There is a Reality, a truth of all existence which is greater and more abiding than all its formations and manifestations; to find that truth and Reality and live in it, achieve the most perfect manifestation and formation possible of it, must be the secret of perfection whether of individual or communal being. This reality is there within each thing and gives to each of its formations its power of being and value of being. The universe is a manifestation of the Reality, and there is a truth of the universal existence, a Power of cosmic being, an all-self or world-spirit. Humanity is a formation or manifestation of the Reality in the universe, and there is a truth and self of humanity, a human spirit, a destiny of human life. The community is a formation of the Reality, a manifestation of the spirit of man, and there is a truth, a self, a power of the collective being. The individual is a formation of the Reality, and there is a truth of the individual, an individual self, soul or spirit that expresses itself through the individual mind, life and body and can express itself too in something that goes beyond mind, life and body, something even that goes beyond humanity. For our humanity is not the whole of the Reality or

its best possible self-formation or self-expression, — the Reality has assumed before man existed an in-frahuman formation and self-creation and can assume after him or in him a superhuman formation and self-creation.³

The entire last chapter of *The Life Divine* from which the above passage has been extracted was written in the later nineteen thirties at the time of the revision of the work, and here we have a bold and brilliant summing-up of the inter-related argument of all three books. While Aurobindonian metaphysics comprehends everything from the atomic to the cosmic (and beyond, too, to the transcendental), Man and Collective Man and the Human Totality occupy the realm between; and it is these latter that are the theme of *Social Development* and *Human Unity*. So important, indeed, are these two works — in themselves, no doubt, but even more in relation to *The Life Divine* — that Kishor Gandhi has categorically declared: "As he (Sri Aurobindo) is now widely acknowledged as the greatest philosopher of all ages, so also he should be recognised as the greatest social philosopher of all times".⁴ At any rate, these are not "made books" — laboriously made out of other books — but rather "the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life".⁵

³ *The Life Divine*, pp. 1246-7.

⁴ *Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (1965), p. 16.

⁵ Milton in *Areopagitica*.

II

The Psychology of Social Development was published in book form in 1949, and was given a new title, *The Human Cycle*. In the third and final sweep of its tremendous argument, *The Life Divine* is the projection of Sri Aurobindo's theory of the 'spiritual evolution', from the Ignorance to the Knowledge; *The Human Cycle* is likewise the projection of his theory of 'social evolution', from the 'symbolic' to the 'psychological' stage. Although reprinted over thirty years after its serialisation in the *Arya*, the book was not subjected to any drastic revision. Occasional references to Lenin, Mussolini and Hitler and to Fascism, Nazism and Soviet Communism show that here and there a sentence or a paragraph was added when the *Arya* sequence of twenty-four chapters was reissued as *The Human Cycle*. However, anything like a full-scale revision was thought unnecessary, for the illustrations from recent and past events were deemed sufficient in the main for the "working out and elucidation" of the theory of the social cycle set forth in the book.

As a convenient starting point, Sri Aurobindo takes up the German theorist Lamprecht's idea that human society progresses through certain distinct stages — symbolic, typical, conventional, individualist and subjective — that are "a sort of psychological cycle through which a nation or a civilisation is bound to proceed".⁶ Having warned the reader against the dangers of such straight-jacketing of the inner psychological processes of human history — "too complex, too synthetical of many-sided and

⁶ *The Human Cycle* (in the omnibus volume containing *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity*, *War and Self-Determination*, 1962), p. 3.

intermixed tendencies" — Sri Aurobindo nevertheless finds the terms useful and makes them the springboards for his own leaps of dialectic. Sir James Frazer saw human history as moving from the age of magic to the age of religion, and again from the age of religion to the present age of science. Oswald Spengler has elaborated with immense erudition his theory of the growth and decline of civilisations; and Arnold Toynbee has likewise seen the historical process as a succession of challenges and responses. A theory is but a theory, a formula is but a formula; and human nature comprises too many imponderables, too many unexpected spurts of chance, too many intricate chain-reactions of fission or fusion. When we fasten on the externals of a situation, things seem easy enough to record — to tabulate — to draw inferences from. But what is visible has its source in the invisible, and human actions are generally the outer expression of certain inner movements — sundry instinctive cravings, intellectual formulations, or spiritual aspirations. With the arrival of Man or *Homo Sapiens* upon the scene of terrestrial evolution, there has been a climate of continuous 'change', continuous yet not uniform; an endless complexity, an infinite variety has characterised the drama of man's evolution from his early primitivism to the moral, intellectual and spiritual hills of striving and peaks of achievement in the panoramic expanse of human history. While *The Human Cycle* is chiefly concerned with the individualist and subjective stages in the evolution of society, the first chapter briefly but pointedly touches upon the three earlier stages as a preparation for the effective take-off in the second chapter.

In India, the Vedic age could be called "symbolic" in the true sense of the word;

If we look at the beginnings of Indian society, the far-off Vedic age which we no longer understand, for we have lost that mentality, we see that everything is symbolic. The religious institution of sacrifice governs the whole society and all its hours and moments, and the ritual of the sacrifice is at every turn and in every detail, as even a cursory study of the Brahmanas and Upanishads ought to show us, mystically symbolic.... Not only the actual religious worship but also the social institutions of the time were penetrated through and through with the symbolic spirit.⁷

This point, of course, has been made already in *The Secret of the Veda*, but here Sri Aurobindo's aim is to show how what was living once could become a dead habit in course of time and turn into a pernicious thing as well. For example, there was the institution of *cātur-varṇya* which, in its Vedic origins (as may be inferred from the celebrated *Purusha Sukta*), had a "symbolic, religious or psychological significance"; no mere poetic image this, no "economic evolution complicated by political causes", no iniquitous system of exploitation:

To them (the men of the Vedic age) this symbol of the Creator's body was more than an image, it expressed a divine reality. Human society was for them an attempt to express in life the cosmic Purusha who has expressed himself otherwise in the material and the supraphysical universe. Man and the cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden Reality.⁸

It was predominantly a spiritual age, and the religious forms and observances were subordinate to the impera-

⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8.

tives of the Spirit. The Vedic description of the Purusha was meant to convey directly through symbol — for the symbol was more direct than the 'sense' it symbolised — that the Divine was Knowledge, Power, Production and Mutuality, and Work and Service, all at once, even as Shakti is Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati — Wisdom, Power, Harmony and Work, the four supreme godheads of the cosmic order.

With the passage of time, however, 'symbol' became 'type', and what had been spiritual and religious became psychological and ethical:

Religion becomes then a mystic sanction for the ethical motive and discipline, Dharma; then becomes its chief social utility, and for the rest it takes a more and more other-worldly turn.... This typical age creates the great social ideals.⁹

The 'ideals' — the Brahmin's, the Kshatriya's, the Vaishya's, the Shudra's — do not long retain their original purity; and becoming progressively unrelated to the inner life, they dwindle into protestations or the emptiest formalities without sincerity, without substance, without truth. And so the 'typal' gives place to the 'conventional' stage:

The conventional stage of human society is born when the external supports, the outward expressions of the spirit or the ideal become more important than the ideal, the body or even the clothes more important than the person. Thus in the evolution of caste, the outward supports of the ethical fourfold order, — birth, economic function, religious ritual and sacrament, family custom, — each began to exaggerate enormously its proportions and its impor-

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

tance in the scheme.... This rigidity once established, the maintenance of the ethical type passed.... In the full economic period of caste the priest and the Pundit masquerade under the name of the Brahmin, the aristocrat and the feudal baron under the name of the Kshatriya, the trader and money-getter under the name of the Vaishya, the half-fed labourer and economic serf under the name of the Shudra. When the economic basis also breaks down, then the unclean and diseased decrepitude of the old system has begun; it has become a name, a shell, a sham.... That in visible fact is the last and present state of the caste system in India.¹⁰

Such is the slow decline and fall into poisonous decrepitude of the inspiring Vedic symbol of the Purusha, the whole Community viewed as the projection of the Divine in the world. With the total obscuration of the 'soul' of the symbol, with the complete drying up of the 'life' of the type, only the dead 'form', the tyranny of convention, the meaningless externals, the arrogant assumption of superiority, the general diffusion of inequity — only these remain. When this becomes intolerable — as it must sooner or later — there is the inevitable revolt, and the stage is set for the age of individualism and reason.

From 'symbol' to 'type', from 'type' to 'convention' — and a dead end; then the individualist revolt, the assertion of reason, the beginnings of the reign of science, the derogation of revelation and faith and religion — to what end? "The dawn of individualism is always a questioning, a denial";¹¹ the debris of past formalisms dead to life has to be cleared first, the dead church, the dead

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 10-2. ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 17.

social institution, the dead ritual, the dead code of honour, the dead scholasticism, all have first to go, and reason is a good hatchet, a good demolisher, an efficient cleanser of our Augean stables. But the tasks of fresh construction cannot be delayed long, and here individualism has to reverse its natural gear and look in new directions for allies:

It must find a general standard of Truth to which the individual judgement of all will be inwardly compelled to subscribe without physical constraint or imposition of irrational authority. And it must reach too some principle of social order which shall be equally founded on a universally recognisable truth of things...¹²

In Europe, reason and science were the means adopted to establish a just social order, and this meant — at least for a time — the fulfilment and triumph of the individualistic age of human society. But the application of a rigid scientific method to probe human nature and prescribe human needs has only succeeded in discovering the truth and law of the “collectivity, the pack, the mass”. In the modern omniscient State (in the “god-state” of the Duce, the Fuehrer, the Big Brother), the commissar and the technocrat — aided more and more by the computer! — might set up a beehive-kind of human society, “a new typical order based upon purely economic capacity and function”. But, of course, the progress of the “god-state”, before it could achieve its deadly fulfilment, might be halted in time. There has been witnessed a backlash against reason’s negations; there is now a growing suspicion about Science’s self-

¹² *ibid.*, p. 22.

sufficiency; and the awakening East at least is unlikely to repeat in its entirety the Western experience with its unbridled individualism. Nevertheless, the age of individualism and reason has resulted in certain sure gains: firstly, the democratic ideal of equality and equality of opportunity, and, secondly, the realisation of the importance of the individual by himself (and not merely as a microcosmic social unit):

He is not merely a member of a human pack, hive or ant-hill; he is something in himself, a soul, a being, who has to fulfil his own individual truth and law as well as his natural or his assigned part in the truth and law of the collective existence.¹³

The rake's progress of individualism towards collectivist death can be — and indeed should be — arrested, and the higher human endeavour should be directed towards a life-giving subjectivism.

During the transitional individualist age, then, there is just a chance that mankind might abandon before it becomes too late the suicidal race towards collectivism, and discover the truth and law of the individual being as well as of the social group to which he belongs. The war of 1914-8, and the even more sanguinary war of 1939-45, were the result of a combination of causes: the nation's vitalistic motive-power, a servile intelligence ready to obey it, and an accomplished materialistic Science, the Djinn, the "giant-worker of huge, gross and soulless miracles".¹⁴ But the two wars have stopped just short of the total annihilation of the human race, thus giving a chance of survival and recovery for Man. In modern times, man's awakened subjectivism has tried to

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 28. ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 38.

put forth its first promising results in art, music, literature, education, and there has also been — as in Ireland and in Bengal — an attempt at the discovery of a nation's or of a sub-nation's soul. Sri Aurobindo rightly points out that it was not her soldiers and empire-builders like Bismarck and Moltke and Kaiser Wilhelm II but her thinkers like Kant, Hegel, Fichte and Nietzsche and her great musicians, Beethoven and Wagner, who represented Germany's great subjective force that has ushered in the modern renaissance. And yet it is the soldier and the racist who have repeatedly seized power and tried to give a wrong turn to history, and the cult of the soulless collectivity has tried to poison the source of all life and growth, the divine individuality in Man that at that level of consciousness is in solidarity with all of its kind, if not of other kinds as well.

As regards the issue between individualism and collectivism, Sri Aurobindo writes:

Subjectivism and objectivism start from the same data, the individual and the collectivity, the complex nature of each with its various powers of the mind, life and body and the search for the law of their self-fulfilment and harmony. But objectivism proceeding by the analytical reason takes an external and mechanical view of the whole problem.... Subjectivism proceeds from within and regards everything from the point of view of a containing and developing self-consciousness. The law here is within ourselves; life is a self-creating progress... the principle of its progress is an increasing self-recognition, self-realisation and a resultant self-shaping.... The whole impulse of subjectivism is to get at the self, to see by the self, to live out the truth of the

self internally and externally but always from an internal initiation and centre.¹⁵

The crux of the matter is that Man, although he is in many superficial respects like an animal, is *not* mere animal. What a piece of work is a 'man', exclaims Hamlet; "How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" Deep within him, there is a fount of Truth that asks to be tapped, and unless this is done, man will be condemned to go round and round the prickly pear of his futile egoisms and Cain-and-Abel racial antagonisms:

The individual animal is dominated entirely by his type, subordinated to his group when he does group himself; individual man has already begun to share something of the infinity, complexity, free variation of the Self we see manifested in the world....

Thus the community stands as a mid-term and intermediary value between the individual and humanity and it exists, not merely for itself, but for the one and the other and to help them to fulfil each other.... Therefore the community has to stand for a time to the individual for humanity even at the cost of standing between him and it and limiting the reach of his universality and wideness of his sympathies.¹⁶

The individual has to grow from within, but without interfering with the growth of others in his group and immediate milieu; his law is to harmonise his life with the life of the social aggregate; and the law of the latter is

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 72-5. ¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 88-9.

to harmonise its life with the life of other and bigger aggregates, and ultimately humanity as a whole.

In the annals of human history, always the pull towards civilisation has been countered by the opposite pull towards barbarism on account of the perversion of the means and the complete ignorance of the ends. Science has been a power of enlightenment, and it has enlarged the common man's intellectual horizons and "sharpened and intensified powerfully the general intellectual capacity of mankind". But science has also facilitated the eruption of the new barbarism of our times. The physical barbarian of old aimed at excellence of body and the development of personal prowess; the new vitalistic and economic barbarian seeks the satisfaction of his appetites and the accumulation of possessions; the successful man is the new ideal man, and sweetness and light and beauty and moral grandeur and aesthetic values are of no account. The supermen of the commercial age are the captain of industry, the tycoon, the financial wizard and the mammoth capitalist; and the men with political power both control and are controlled by the plutocrats and the other occult rulers of the society. If such a state of affairs should persist too long, "Life would become clogged and perish of its own plethora or burst in its straining to a gross expansion. Like the too massive Titan, it will collapse by its own mass, *mole ruet sua*".¹⁷

If barbarism is below civilisation or is soured civilisation, philistinism is civilisation grown hypocritical and soulless and lifeless, petrified before it could flower into culture. The Philistine against whom Matthew Arnold raised his voice "is not dead — quite the contrary, he

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 105.

abounds — but he no longer reigns".¹⁸ And there is the recent emergent, the "sensational man", the Jack-of-all-ideas and new intellectual fashions, the man of imprecisions and enthusiasms, the peddler of panaceas and the user of scientific gadgets, the alert gymnastic who lands himself on every new bandwagon, the Forsythe class (so to say) or the great inchoate patron of the mass communication media. And the result has been "to cheapen thought and art and literature, to make talent and even genius run in the grooves of popular success...."¹⁹ For true culture, however, we have to go beyond sensationalism and philistinism and even civilisation. Culture is the cultivation of the inner countries of the mind and sensibility. But the ethical man and the aesthetic man — who flower in an age of culture — themselves need a sovereign third power to sustain and greatnessen them. This couldn't be Reason and the intelligent Will, although it has its importance; for Reason itself finds itself stopped by a stubborn barrier. Checkmated, Reason sees its occupation concluded and now tells unfinished Man:

"There is a Soul, a Self, a God in the world and in man who works concealed and all is his self-concealing and gradual self-unfolding. His minister I have been, slowly to unseal your eyes, remove the thick integuments of your vision until there is only my own luminous veil between you and him. Remove that and make the soul of man one in fact and nature with this Divine...."²⁰

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 161-2. Cf. *Isha Upanishad*: "The face of Truth is covered with a brilliant golden lid; that do thou remove, O Fosterer, for the law of the Truth, for sight."

This brings us to the role of religion in the life of man and society. In one of the later chapters of *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo refers to the four main lines followed by Nature — religion, occultism, spiritual thought and spiritual experience and realisation — in her attempt to open up the inner being.²¹ These are really interlinked lines and answer the needs of man's self-expansion and bring about his slow unfolding. Religion is quite simply "the search for God and the finding of God", and in this adventure reason is but a poor aid. Men with God-experience start or sustain religions, but when dogma and ritual and scholastic systematisation become cancerous growths around religion, in other words when religion degenerates into religionism, it becomes a source of strife, a feeder of war, a veil for ambition, an instrument of oppression and a cloak for obscurantism. The search for the good life, for beauty, for God begins obscurely even at the infrarational level but finds its fulfilment only at the suprarational or supramental level; and the level of reason is the necessary realm between, though not the secure resting place. Even in a predominantly infrarational period, Calibans might occasionally speculate on their godhead, Setebos, and make a show of reason. The chequered reign of reason that follows the infrarational age must witness a steady diffusion of its beneficial influence, ushering in democracy and socialism; but these too could easily get corrupted, as they have been in the recent past:

In Fascist countries the swing away from Rationalism is marked and open; a surface vital subjectivism has taken its place and it is in the name of the national soul and its self-expression and mani-

²¹ *The Life Divine*, pp. 1024-6.

festation that the leaders and prophets teach and violently enforce their totalitarian *mystique*. The essential features are the same in Russia and in Fascist countries, so that to the eye of the outsider their deadly quarrel seems to be a blood-feud of kinsmen fighting for the inheritance of their slaughtered parents — Democracy and the Age of Reason.²²

In its search for self-knowledge, then, Life must ultimately rely only on the Light of the Spirit, and India's ideal man, the Rishi, is one who has found the supra-intellectual and supramental spiritual truth. Such a man can "guide the world humanly as God guides it divinely, because like the Divine he is in the life of the world and yet above it".²³ This is not very different from the Platonic view, expressed in the *Republic*, that "until philosophers are kings... and political greatness and wisdom meet in one... cities will never have rest from their evils".²⁴ These considerations lead to the conclusion that in spirituality alone lies our ultimate and only hope for perfection of Man as well as Collective or Communal Man — a spirituality that would take up into itself *all* his manifold urges and faculties and "reveal to these ill-accorded forces their divine sense and the conditions of their godhead, reconcile them all to each other...."²⁵

Man and Collective Man: the Individual and Society — must a firm reconciliation, a healthy and creative partnership between the two elude us for ever? The mystic,

²² *The Human Cycle*, p. 276.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 242.

²⁴ Plato's idea of a philosopher was that he should have a true vision of Reality and that he should possess utter truthfulness.

²⁵ *The Human Cycle*, p. 244.

in his moments of self-transcendence, experiences a dissolution of the individual in the totality or the convergence of the totality in the individual. At the other extreme, the prophets of historical materialism, Marx and Engels, declare in their Communist Manifesto:

In the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.²⁶

But as against this Communist dream and hope and assurance, the hard reality — wherever it has so far been tried — has turned out to be different. But this needn't always be so, for it is not as though the principle of Communism itself requires the minimisation of the individual and the rearing up of a "termite civilisation": and Sri Aurobindo posits the possibility of the Communist principle becoming a means "at once of the fulfilment of the individual and the perfect harmony of a collective being".²⁷ But if that is ever to happen, "it must be on a foundation of soul's brotherhood and the death of egoism. A forced association and a mechanical comradeship would end in a world-wide fiasco".²⁸ Marx, Engels and Lenin after them thought that, through the abolition of class differences and by means of socialised production, it would be possible to secure for every member of society an existence sufficient materially and ultimately even an existence permitting and indeed guaranteeing the full development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties. But just as the old revo-

²⁶ *A Handbook of Marxism* (1933), p. 47.

²⁷ From 'A Postscript Chapter' in *The Ideal of Human Unity* (included in *The Human Cycle* omnibus volume, p. 795).

²⁸ *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 81

lutionary of the time of landed aristocracy became the new bourgeois of the capitalistic age, the new Marxist revolutionary too has tended to become the new philistine, the new commissar of the Communist Super-State. Dictatorship of whatever description can hardly ever be expected voluntarily to relinquish the power it has won and enjoyed exercising. Socialism is a worthy ideal, but it is impossible of complete realisation so long as man remains a slave to his own inveterate egoism. As matters stand, we cannot think of a political or social order that will be altogether free from the depredations of egoism, and the destructive play of selfishness, jealousy, division and strife. "A deeper brotherhood, a yet unfounded law of love", says Sri Aurobindo, "is the only sure foundation possible for a perfect social evolution, no other can replace it".²⁹ Thus, although Marx and Lenin have been significant milestones in the history of social evolution, the future must go beyond Marx, and beyond Lenin, and beyond Mao, and ordain and carry out a spiritual revolution that may crack the ego, end the malignant fevers of the ages, and bind man and society and humanity into a single brotherhood conscious of its spiritual unity.

In the last four chapters of *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo considers the question of a truly subjective or spiritual turn to individual and communal life in ampler elaboration and in the accents of prophetic authority. It is as though he seems to say: Communism, yes, but beyond Communism too; and Religion, yes, but beyond religion to a spiritual view and way of life. It was Karl Marx, again, who had said about religion that "it is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a

²⁹ *The Human Cycle*, p. 296.

heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation". Religion may have been long used (as Marx said) as "the opium of the people"; but true religion, grounded on spirituality, would prove to be, not the opium, but the elixir of the people. When religion learns to equate the love of God with the love of one's fellow human beings; when man hearkens indeed to Jesus' commandment:

A new commandment I give unto you,

That ye love one another;

as I have loved you,

that ye also love one another;³⁰

when man takes to heart Sri Aurobindo's admonition:

This is a miracle that men can love God,

yet fail to love humanity.

With whom are they in love then?³¹

then "religion" can be passive no more in the face of antagonism of interests, clash of egos, man becoming wolf to man, but will fight all evil with the infallible weapon of the deeper law of love by identity. Not science merely, not the vague notion of "progress", not formalised dogmatic creed, not regimentation or computerisation, but the bold cultivation of spiritual thought and the progressive experience of psychological and spiritual oneness can achieve the conquest of the Kingdom of God and the establishment of the reign of the Spirit over mind and life and body. Freedom and unity — desirable things both and apparently incompatible — can be reconciled only in God or at the level of spiritual consciousness. And so Sri Aurobindo gathers his insights and intuitions into a final statement about the future man and the future human society. For individual and

³⁰ *St. John*, x. 13. 34. ³¹ *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 14.

collective man alike there is one common work, one supreme goal, — namely, the finding of the divine Self and its realisation here upon earth in all segments and directions of life:

That will mean the turning of the cycle of social development... out of its incomplete repetitions on a new upward line towards the goal. For having set out... with a symbolic age, an age in which man felt a great Reality behind all life which he sought through symbols, it will reach an age in which it will begin to live in that Reality, not through the symbol, not by the power of type or the convention or of the individual reason and intellectual will, but in our own highest nature which will be the nature of that Reality fulfilled in the conditions — not necessarily the same as now — of terrestrial existence.³²

The coming of such a spiritual age cannot, of course, be taken for granted, or prepared for institutionally. Much would depend upon those — not just an isolated Gnostic Being or Mahatma or Mahayogi, but a number of them — who by their self-evolution or self-transcendence into a higher mould have qualified to be leaders of the spiritual march. But although these first few may by their own exertions have won the leadership of the spiritual age, it will not be for themselves alone, but for all; they will take all human life for their province and strive to regenerate the life of humanity as a whole to fit the conditions of the spiritual age. If the number of these spiritual men — these *samurai* in the service of the Divine, these Rishis and Mahapurushas — is sufficiently large to make a critical mass, “then the Spirit

³² *The Human Cycle*, p. 349.

who is here in man, now a concealed divinity, a developing light and power, will descend more fully as the Avatar of a yet unseen and unguessed Godhead from above into the soul of mankind and into the great individualities in whom the light and power are strongest. There will then be fulfilled the change that will prepare the transition of human life from its present limits into those larger and purer horizons".³³

III

The Ideal of Human Unity, first issued as a book in 1919, was published in a second revised edition in 1950. The main revision had been done before the second world war, but the important Postscript chapter was written shortly before publication and some of the footnotes too were written after the war. Like *The Human Cycle*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* also examines the problem of 'collective man', but in political rather than sociological terms, in the global rather than in the narrower context of group or region. Each inquiry throws light on the other, and together the two treatises project a plausible and prophetic vision of future possibilities for the human race.

In simple terms, the question may be stated thus: if individual man can transmit something of his vision and spirit-born strength to the communal group around him

³³ *ibid.*, p. 361. For more detailed discussions of Sri Aurobindo's social philosophy, the reader is referred to Kishor Gandhi's essays in his *Social Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, Jitendra Nath Mohanty's 'Subjectivism and the Ideal Social Order' (in *Loving Homage*, 1958) and 'Integralism and Modern Philosophical Anthropology' in (*The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, 1960).

and help it to realise its higher potentialities, cannot this process be extended still further, from community to community and from nation to nation, till this sense of spiritual oneness embraces at last the human race itself in its global entirety? The individual wants freedom, the fullest possible freedom, for without freedom life would lose all its flavour and vitality for growth; but the individual also wants security and a richer life in a collectivity, for man is a social and communal being too. But a reconciliation between the two divergent desires hasn't been easy. Man has only too often played wolf to man, and humanity has purblindly see-sawed in the past between sanguinary war and uneasy peace. History has taught us nothing, sociology hasn't been of much use. Our thought and action in collective life has been "shallow and empirical", and has not sought, much less based itself upon, "a firm, profound and complete knowledge".³⁴

Further, if past experience is to be trusted, it is not vast collectivities like empires but little nations — the Hebrew tribes, the Greek city states, the small mediaeval Italian cities, the modest-sized kingdoms of the Indian Heroic Age, the later (and not much bigger) kingdoms of the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Pandyas, Cholas, Cheras — that have given to humanity its most cherished glories. A monstrously forbidding concentration of humanity in capital cities like London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, New Delhi raises its own problems, not easy to understand and much less to solve. The general drift of human experience seems to be that "collective life is more at ease with itself, more genial, varied, fruitful when it can

³⁴ *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination*, p. 368.

concentrate itself in small spaces and simpler organisms".³⁵

Indeed, the whole process of Nature seems to be based on a poise between the individual and the aggregate, a mutuality of interdependence and a harmony of the whole. As the aggregate increases in size or comes to be more and more widely extended, the problem of harmony too raises newer and newer elements of complexity. Between the individual and the totality of mankind, there must be many milestones of aggregation and partial integration:

Between himself and this too immense whole there erect themselves, partly as aids, partly as barriers to the final unity, the lesser aggregates which it has been necessary to form in the progressive stages of human culture.... The family, the commune, the clan or tribe, the class, the city state or congeries of tribes, the nation, the empire are so many stages in this progress and constant enlargement... at every step humanity is confronted with various problems which arise, not only from the difficulty of accord between the interests of the individual and those of the immediate aggregate, the community, but between the need and interests of the smaller integralities and the growth of that larger whole which is to ensphere them all.³⁶

In an ideal condition, neither a dominant minority would exploit the vast majority (the "dumb millions", as we usually call them), nor a ruling majority (in our democracies) would oppress the minorities. But it also means that a cultural minority must give up, in the larger interests of integration, the inessential elements in its separative existence. And, ultimately, however perfect

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 370. ³⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 375-6.

the social, administrative or cultural framework of the aggregate, the individual can fulfil himself best only if the collective ordering doesn't coerce him into a prescribed mould or "the rigidity of a narrow culture or petty class or national interest".³⁷

Taking a large view of the evolutionary march, Sri Aurobindo sees that uniformity is the law in Matter, while free variation and individual development are characteristic of Life and Mind. From this he concludes that man too, being evolved out of Matter and Life, "begins with uniformity and subservience of the individual and proceeds towards variety and freedom of the individual".³⁸ In *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo viewed social development as a movement from the symbolic to the subjective (or spiritual) age: from an age that was governed by the reflected light of an obscurely felt Reality to a future age that would actually live in that Reality, the wheel of the 'human cycle' thereby coming full circle. In the present treatise, Sri Aurobindo sees a like circular movement:

...there is also the ancient tradition... of a golden age in which he (man) was freely social without society... it is also possible that our progress has not been a development in a straight line, but in cycles.... It is even possible that our original state was an instinctive animal spontaneity of free and fluid association. Our destiny may be the conversion of an original animal association into a community of the gods. Our progress may be a devious round leading from the easy and spontaneous uniformity and harmony which reflects Nature to the self-possessed unity which reflects the Divine.³⁹

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 380. ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 383. ³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 383-4.

But it is not easy to peer so far into the dim vistas of the remotest past. Sri Aurobindo therefore confines his inquiry to the historic period when, with whatever vicissitudes, the 'state' idea has been trying to live with or contain or suppress individualist urges and stances. 'Society', it must be remembered, is not the same thing as 'State', for the latter is a more deliberate, and hence a more artificial, contrivance or creation:

The organised State is neither the best mind of the nation, nor is it even the sum of the communal energies.... It is a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable. What that egoism is in its relation to other collective egoisms we know... the State is an entity which, with the greatest amount of power, is the least hampered by internal scruples or external checks. It has no soul or only a rudimentary one. It is a military, political and economic force... the chief use it makes of its undeveloped intellect is to blunt by fictions, catchwords and recently by State philosophies, its ill-developed ethical conscience.⁴⁰

How unreasonable, then, to ask the individual — who, after all, *has* a soul, an intellect, a sensibility, a conscience, a vibrating life — to immolate himself at the altar of the State? State egoism may be a larger, a more powerful and ruthless egoism, but not a superior one; "rather in many ways inferior to the best individual egoism". The "egoism" of Socrates, for example, was far, far superior to that of the State that condemned him to death. "Man lives by the community", says Sri Aurobindo: "he needs it to develop himself individually as well as collectively".⁴¹ But the chief role of the

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 391. ⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 394.

State is only "to provide all possible facilities for cooperative action, to remove obstacles, to prevent all really harmful waste and friction".⁴²

But the "egoism" of the national State dies hard. The war of 1914-8 was itself the resultant of the violent clash of several national egoisms:

From Morocco to Tripoli, from Tripoli to Thrace and Macedonia, from Macedonia to Herzegovnia, the electric chain ran with that inevitable logic of causes and results, actions and their fruits which we call Karma, creating minor detonations on its way till it found the inflammable point and created that vast explosion which has filled people with blood and ruins.... The tree must bear its own proper fruit, and Nature is always a diligent gardener.⁴³

Under these circumstances, would the unification of mankind through the bringing together of the several existing national egoisms be ever possible? And if possible, would such a "union" be desirable? With all its limitations and perversions, the 'nation' seems to be on the whole a viable enough collective unit, — and this, even before it gets transformed into a political unit. With scores of such national units in existence, which is a more desirable consummation, — a federation of free nations, or a few empires and imperial hegemonies? With a wealth of illustration drawn from history, Sri Aurobindo considers the different possibilities, and some of the footnotes — added later — modify or reinforce the points made in the text. For example, a reference to the British Empire is qualified in the footnote that takes cognisance of the fact that the Empire has since

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 396. ⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 515-6.

become a "free commonwealth". History has seen the rise and fall of empires, but no single formula will fit all of them. The example of the Roman Empire imposing its culture on the conquered peoples hasn't been always repeated — or to the same extent — by later empires. In the movement and clash of peoples and cultures, history has witnessed all kinds of minglings and assimilations and suppressions. The modern Western impact on the East, for instance, has followed a course of its own. India, Japan and China have received readily things of the mind from the West — "its science, its curiosity, its ideal of universal education and uplift, its abolition of privilege, its broadening, liberalising, democratic tendency, its instinct of freedom and equality, its call for the breaking down of narrow and oppressive forms, for air, space, light" — but resisted any interference with "the things of the soul, the profoundest things of the mind and temperament".⁴⁴ It is not so much "conquest" of the East by the West, but a matter of "mutual understanding and exchange, mutual adaptation and new formation".

Taking his cue from Nature's way of building up her physical aggregates — first a body, next a common life and vital interest for the constituents of the body, and last a conscious mind or sense as the centre of governance — Sri Aurobindo argues that in the building up of human aggregates too this sequence of conditions must prevail. As he had written in the *Bande Mataram*, the conditions of national identity are geographical unity, a common past and a current common motivation towards unity.⁴⁵ The point is further amplified in the present work:

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 422. ⁴⁵ 18 August 1907.

But we have to mark that this national ego owes its life to the coalescence of the separative instinct and the instinct of unity; for the nation feels itself one as distinguished from other nations.... There is a deeper factor... a sort of religion of country, a constant even if not always explicit recognition, not only of the sacredness of the physical mother, the land, but also, in however obscure a way, of the nation as a collective soul which it is the first duty and need of every man to keep alive, to defend from suppression or moral attaint or, if suppressed, then to watch, wait and struggle for its release and rehabilitation, if sicklied over with the touch of any fatal spiritual ailment, then to labour always to heal and revivify and save alive.⁴⁶

This is the very religion of nationalism, the religion Sri Aurobindo preached in his political days. But can we expect a religion of globalism to supersede the reign of the many ruling localisms and nationalisms? Even an empire hasn't been able to secure the same allegiance from all its territories, and a heterogeneous empire usually carries the seeds of its own decay and disintegration, unless the bonds of empire are voluntarily relaxed so as to make them tolerable, and also unless there is a spirit of give and take among the constituents of the empire or federation or confederation.

The ideal of unity — whether in smaller or larger aggregates — has sought in the past to realise 'itself, first, by the development of a central authority, second, by bringing about a measure of uniformity in the administration, and third, by achieving to a greater or lesser

⁴⁶ *The Human Cycle etc.*, p. 753.

extent the transformation of that authority from an autocrat or a ruling class into a body whose function was to represent the thought and will of the whole community, the whole process of change representing the evolution from a natural and organic to a mechanically organised society. A free association and unity would be preferable always to any external compulsion or arbitrary creation, but Nature's way has been a spiralling movement through trial and error and partial success. Sri Aurobindo refers in a footnote to the "practical possibility" of a United States of Europe, almost anticipating the European Common Market and the fuller union that seems to be set towards self-accomplishment. There might arise too, Sri Aurobindo thinks, "a system of large imperial empires", in this again projecting a fearful possibility like the three monsters — Eastasia, Eurasia and Oceania — described by George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet another Aurobindonian "hypothetical forecast"⁴⁷ — a nation being rent in two by civil war — has since been justified by subsequent events like the civil war in Spain, the horrors of the partition of India, the Korean War and the prolonged agony of Viet Nam.

In Part Two of *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo views the social revolution of the human race as a development of the relations between the three constant factors — individuals, communities and mankind:

Each seeks its own fulfilment and satisfaction, but each is compelled to develop them, not independently, but in relation to the others.... Mankind as a whole has at present no consciously organised common life; it has only an inchoate organisation

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 534-5.

determined much more by circumstances than by human intelligence and will. And yet the idea and the fact of our common human existence, nature, destiny has always exercised its strong influence on human thought and action.⁴⁸

Things have, however, changed during the last fifty years, especially since the coming of the Jet age and the Space age. The whole adventure of Apollo flights and moon-landings is shared by hundreds of millions on the TV all over the globe, and a new generation is growing up that will surely make mock of the narrow loyalties of their progenitors. In the history of nations, economic centralisation has usually preceded legislative, social, administrative and political centralisation. Cannot a world-union too come into existence in much the same way and develop in due course into a world-state? But, then, will not a world-state prove a veritable Frankenstein monster for individuals and individual nations alike? The tyranny of the majority can be odious enough, "but what the future promises us is something more formidable still, the tyranny of the whole, of the self-hypnotised mass over its constituent groups and units"⁴⁹ — and this would apply to national and international situations alike.

In *The Human Cycle*, Sri Aurobindo saw the curve of the present 'subjective' age culminating in a spiritual age, human thought and action transfigured by the infusion of the consciousness of oneness and harmony. The grand argument of *The Ideal of Human Unity* also leads up at last to a similar conclusion. In a world-union or a world-state, it is not 'administrative' or 'military' support that will sustain the world community; a "reli-

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 558-9. ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 678.

gion of humanity" may, perhaps, produce better results, but what is basic to any religion is not a set of ethical rules but the ambience of the Spirit. Eighteenth-century Europe, by intuition as it were, sought to define the "religion of humanity" as the efflorescence of liberty, equality and fraternity. But Sri Aurobindo would go further:

Freedom, equality, brotherhood are the three godheads of the soul; they cannot be really achieved through the external machinery of society or by man so long as he lives only in the individual and the communal ego.... Yet brotherhood is the real key to the triple gospel of the idea of humanity... freedom, equality, unity are the eternal attributes of the Spirit. It is the practical recognition of this truth, it is the awakening of the soul in man and the attempt to get him to live from his soul and not from his ego which is the inner meaning of religion, and it is that to which the religion of humanity also must arrive before it can fulfil itself in the life of the race.⁵⁰

The many favourable factors towards world-union — an appreciation of the closeness of common interests, the force of the globally uniting sentiment of cosmopolitanism, the move for an international framework for consultation, deliberation and arbitration, the psychological impulsion provided by the desire for a religion of humanity — would nevertheless not be strong enough to ensure human unity so long as man or collective man refused to see the spiritual reality behind the brilliant and bewildering façades of material life:

A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 763-5.

the future.... A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one, that humanity is its highest present vehicle on earth, that the human race and the human being are the means by which it will progressively reveal itself here. It implies a growing attempt to live out this knowledge and bring about a kingdom of this divine Spirit upon earth.... A spiritual oneness which would create a psychological oneness not dependent upon any intellectual or outward uniformity and compel a oneness of life not bound up with its mechanical means of unification, but ready always to enrich its secure unity by a free inner variation and freely varied outer self-expression, this would be the basis for a higher type of human existence.⁵¹

It is all of a piece, the argument of *The Life Divine*, *The Human Cycle* and of *The Ideal of Human Unity*. Other — mechanistic, vitalistic, intellectual, legal or ethical — solutions can only be palliatives or makeshifts; the spiritual solution alone can really solve the obstreperous problem of freedom, unity and fulfilment, whether in relation to man or collective man or global humanity.

Over a decade after Sri Aurobindo had concluded his series of articles on Human Unity in the *Arya*, Rabindranath Tagore said in the course of his Hibbert Lectures: "On the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge".⁵² Still later, Arnold Toynbee ventured to see a "divine plan" behind the rise and fall of civilisations and discover a kind of progress in spiritual

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 774-6. ⁵² *The Religion of Man* (1931), p. 17.

terms, resulting in "a cumulative increase in the means of Grace at man's disposal", making it possible for human souls, while still in this world, "to come to know God better and to come to love Him more nearly in His own way".⁵³ And Radhakrishnan has declared in a lecture: "In spite of racial and national differences, we must evolve a relationship, a unity of mind and heart, a feeling which will bring us intimately close to one another.... Every truly religious man whose nature is freed from dogmatic rigidity realises that all prayers flow into one Supreme".⁵⁴ It was Sri Aurobindo's view that to realise freedom and unity you have first to realise and possess God "at your highest self and the self of all creatures".⁵⁵ There is a superficial resemblance between these utterances, and yet the difference in emphasis is no less important. What is inferred as a possibility by Toynbee is to Sri Aurobindo a certainty in the light of his Yoga, a thing as good as decreed, a condition of supermanhood in a background of supernature now in the first stages of its process of terrestrial fulfilment. Where the historian, the philosopher and the poet are guarded, vague or intuitively perceptive, Sri Aurobindo the Yogin-Seer is definitive, but it is surely most significant that all of them should see tomorrow's world and the future humanity growing dimensions essentially spiritual.⁵⁶

⁵³ *Civilisation on Trial* (1948), pp. 262-3.

⁵⁴ *Religion in a Changing World* (1967), p. 179.

⁵⁵ *The Human Cycle*, p. 341.

⁵⁶ The reader is also referred to Nolini Kanta Gupta's *Towards a New Society* (1947), Sisirkumar Mitra's 'History as Future' (*Loving Homage*, 1968) and the present writer's 'Tomorrow's World' (*Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1947).

IV

Since the life of the *Arya* synchronised with the course of the first world war and the months of peace-making, it was inevitable that Sri Aurobindo should occasionally make that ghastly global tragedy the subject of formal discussion in his journal. Some of these articles appeared as a book in 1920, and it has since been reprinted more than once. Whether a war is going on or not, thinking men cannot help probing the causes of war and speculating about the possibility of the permanent outlawry of war. In the Foreword to the first published edition of *War and Self-Determination*, Sri Aurobindo underlined the idea behind the collection — “the obvious but practically quite forgotten truth that the destiny of the race in this age of crisis and revolution will depend much more on the spirit which we are than on the machinery we shall use”.⁵⁷ Although the subjects discussed seem various on the surface, the frame of reference — the point of view — is the same. In ‘The Passing of War’ (written in the early months of the war), Sri Aurobindo points out that, not being a mere machine in his constitution or functioning, man (or mankind for that matter) cannot be saved by machinery; “only by an entire change, which shall affect all the members of his being, can he be liberated from his discords and imperfections”.⁵⁸ The egoistic craving for power and dominion, the scramble of competitive commercialism for markets and the periodic unloosening of the dogs of war form a fatally logical sequence, and only the spiritual solution can prove to be an effective and a lasting one:

⁵⁷ *The Human Cycle etc.*, p. 803. ⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 813.

Only when man has developed not merely a fellow-feeling with all men, but a dominant sense of unity and commonalty, only when he is aware of them, not merely as brothers, — that is a fragile bond, — but as parts of himself, only when he has learned to live, not in his separate personal and communal ego-sense, but in a large universal consciousness, can the phenomenon of war, with whatever weapons, pass out of his life without the possibility of return.⁵⁹

'The Unseen Power' was written when, although in a literal sense the war had ended, it was being continued in other ways. Peace-making was in progress, an era of revolutions had begun, the old maps were being redrawn, and new political alignments were coming into existence. In this essay wrung by the compulsion of the hour, Sri Aurobindo is at his impassioned best, and the writing has a prophetic cast. He sees the phantasmagoria of the world crisis with unflinching eyes, and he sees behind it the glimpse of a preordained drift of events — "a meaning and the promise of a new creation". When Sri Aurobindo sees the terrible havoc and ruin and suffering caused by the war, he is reminded of Arjuna's words in the Gita which provoke Krishna's answer: "I am the Time-Spirit, destroyer of the world, arisen huge-statured for the destruction of the nations"; and Sri Aurobindo concludes that it is not human reason or human science but a greater spirit that is the *sūtradhara* behind the blood-stained scenes:

It is the wrath of Rudra that has swept over the earth and the track of his foot-prints can be seen in these ruins. There has come as a result upon the

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 819.

race the sense of having lived in many falsehoods and the need of building according to an ideal.... Two great words of the divine Truth... freedom and unity. But everything depends, first, upon the truth of our vision of them, secondly, upon the sincerity with which we apply it, last and especially on the inwardness of our realisation.⁶⁰

In the essay 'After the War', Sri Aurobindo refers to the "continued existence, success, unbroken progress of the Russian revolution":

This event promises to be as significant in human history as the great overturn of established ideas and institutions initiated in France in the eighteenth century, and to posterity it may well be this and not the downfall of Germany for which the great war will be ever memorable.... The achievements of this extraordinary government have been of a sufficiently astonishing character.... It is acts of faith and audacities of this scale that change or hasten the course of human progress. It does not follow necessarily that what is being attempted now is the desirable or the definite form of the future society, but is a certain sign that a phase of civilisation is beginning to pass and the Time-Spirit preparing a new phase and a new order.⁶¹

Sri Aurobindo also notes, as the second striking feature of the situation, the wave of unrest sweeping over the

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 832.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 896-7. In a conversation on 9 December 1925, Sri Aurobindo is reported to have said: "...I worked for the success of the Russian Revolution for three years. I was one of the influences that worked to make it a success" (*Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 26).

East from Egypt to China. For the time being, at any rate, the rise of socialism and the Asiatic resurgence seemed (in Sri Aurobindo's eyes) to form "a moral alliance"; but he saw too that they might not, after all, "realise the larger human hope".⁶² And in this he had correctly read the future with a Yogi's clear gift of vision.

In his essay on 'Self-Determination', again, Sri Aurobindo differentiates between the popular idea which is but a half-truth and the right idea that would give 'self-determination' the true spiritual meaning:

The recognition and fulfilment of the divine being in oneself and in man, the kingdom of God within and in the race, is the basis on which man must come in the end to the possession of himself as a free self-determining being and of mankind too in a mutually possessing self-expansion as a harmoniously self-determining united existence.⁶³

If Sri Aurobindo was not swept off his feet by the much-extolled principle of 'self-determination' (and he has been amply justified by future events), neither was he impressed by the mountainous labour that was then in progress in the act of producing the mouse of the League of Nations. He has no difficulty in exposing the paltry insufficiency of its aims and the total inadequacy of its means: its selective and its oligarchic character: its shameful compromise with the bigger national egoisms: its brazen enunciation of a new theory of trusteeship: and, in sum, its being "a leaky and ill-balanced ship launched on waters of tempest and chaos without a chart or compass or sailing instructions".⁶⁴ He saw clearly that if it was to serve humanity, the League

⁶² *The Human Cycle etc.*, p. 903. ⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 847. ⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 869.

must be "cast in another mould animated by another spirit", and so he comes back to the plea that "salvation for individual or community comes not by the Law but by the Spirit".⁶⁵ Pending such a radical spiritual solution to the world's ills, even so imperfect an instrument like the League of Nations might serve humanity's "turn for practice and for a far-off expectation".⁶⁶

Finally, in an article written after the war but not then published in the *Arya* nor included in the collection *War and Self-Determination*, Sri Aurobindo took a quick backward glance as well as a sharp forward look, and either way his findings are important. There is reference to the collapse of Imperial Germany ("a composite godhead of Moloch and Mammon seated between the guardian figures of Intelligence and Science"), the half-headed peace of Versailles that was but a prolongation of the war, and the feeble and mutilated hope of the League of Nations; but the end of the affair was indicated by none of these, but would be a denouement yet to be played out and concluded:

Meanwhile much is gone that had to go, though relics and dregs of it remain for destruction, and the agony of a sanguinary struggle is ended, and for that there may well be rejoicing. But if something is ended, all has yet to be begun. The human spirit has still to find itself, its idea and its greater orientation.⁶⁷

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GLOBAL COMPREHENSION

I

Strange, indeed, are the ironies concocted by the Time-Spirit. An alien bureaucracy sends a patriot to prison and he turns it, as Sri Aurobindo did at Alipur, into a Temple of Sadhana; or, like Tilak at Mandalay, he finds fulfilment in the composition of a masterly commentary, the *Gita Rahasya*; or he opens himself, as Jawaharlal Nehru did in *The Discovery of India*, to the influence of the winding movement of his nation's unfolding history. Or, again, a poetaster-laureate writes a foolish panegyric on a dead King, and a Byron answers with the gloriously entertaining satire, *The Vision of Judgment*; a Kingsley casually assails the convert Newman's integrity, and the latter in self-defence writes a classic spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, wrung from the depths; or an egregious critic, William Archer, throws random brickbats at a great country's culture, and the Yogin-Seer Sri Aurobindo turns what begins as a punishment into a richly rewarding and many-faceted study of the glory that is India's heritage from the past.

The volume now appearing as *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953) comprises three distinct groups of essays: first three essays with the title 'The Issue: Is India Civilised?', next the series 'A Rationalistic Critic on Indian Culture' (this was the main "reply" to Archer), and finally the comprehensive 'A Defence of Indian Culture' with sections on 'Religion and Spirituality', 'Indian Art', 'Indian Literature' and 'Indian Polity'.

All these had originally appeared in the *Arya* from December 1919 to January 1921, but were later subjected to some revision before publication in book form. The four essays that make *The Renaissance in India* were published even earlier, between August and November 1918. Together, the *Foundations* and the *Renaissance* give us a view of India's living past and throbbing present that is refreshingly original as well as stimulating and enlightening. Coming after *The Life Divine*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Psychology of Social Development* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* (only the *Synthesis* not yet concluded), these new series of essays that appeared during the last two and a half years of the *Arya* were more directly concerned with India; and although not at first designed to be a treatise — and even now the garner of essays hasn't the configuration of a forbidding treatise — the *Foundations* and the *Renaissance* add up to a very reliable guide to the multiverses of India's cultural history. While the *Veda* and the *Gita* and two of the shorter Upanishads have been studied in depth separately (as reviewed in an earlier chapter), the complementary works, the *Foundations* and the *Renaissance*, recapture with a compellingly sure insight the essence of scripture, religion, literature, social, political and cultural history; and, in the result, there emerges a comprehensive image of the Tree of Indian Culture, with its roots in the Vedic age several thousand years ago, its oak-like trunk of historical times altogether impressive though rugged and weather-beaten, and its branches and foliage responding readily to the life-giving rays of the rising Sun of the unfolding present and carrying in its secret folds the flowers of the future.

Many are the Westerners who have with what looks like wilful purblindness and perversity seen Indian culture upside down and broadcast their fantastic findings. There have been others too, who have felt the call of India and succumbed to the fascination of her infectious spirituality. If there have been denigrators of Indian culture like Abbe Dubois, Macaulay and William Archer, there have been stout apologists too like Sir William Jones, Max Muller and Sir John Woodroffe: negative and positive responses seem to cancel one another out; but this does not absolve Indians from the duty to gauge their heritage aright, to cherish and make proper use of it, and help it too to put forth new leaves of promise during the current dawns to meet the noons of the future. It was this consideration that made Sri Aurobindo write at so much length, first with a view to dispelling the clouds of present misunderstanding and then turning the light of right understanding on India's unique cultural heritage.

II

William Archer was on the whole a sound dramatic critic, although some of his animadversions on the lesser Elizabethans were too harsh and needed a T. S. Eliot to put the record straight. But when Archer ventured, with more valour than discretion, to indict the culture of a sub-continent like India, he was really asking for trouble.¹ The provocation he gave was outrageous enough, for otherwise a *sthitaprajña*, a supramental Yogi,

¹ *India and the Future* by William Archer (1917). It is about 300 pages in bulk and carries 36 illustrations.

like Sri Aurobindo would not have found it necessary to take notice of it. Archer was not Archer merely, but a type, a phenomenon, the type of the West's supercilious castigation of India, the ugly phenomenon of incomprehension playing a critical Momus, the rusted and leaky bucket making faces at the waters of the Ganga. And hence Sri Aurobindo felt impelled to string his bow and release such a lightning series of arrows to hit unerringly the offending target. It is not that criticism by itself, honest criticism, is unwelcome, but it can have no value when it is mere slander and "vitriol-throwing"; besides, Archer had his political axes to grind — to prove India barbarous "in order to destroy or damage her case for self-government", and that sort of "extraneous motive at once puts his (Archer's) whole pleading out of court". Then comes the main indictment:

...this book is not criticism; it is literary or rather journalistic pugilism. There too it is of a peculiar kind; it is a furious sparring at a lay figure of India which is knocked down at pleasure through a long and exuberant dance of misstatement and exaggeration in the hope of convincing an ignorant audience that the performer has prostrated a living adversary. Sanity, justice, measure are things altogether at a discount: a show-off of the appearance of staggering and irresistible blows is the object held in view, and for that anything comes in handy, — ...all this is not the occasional freak of a well-informed critic suffering from a fit of mental biliousness.... It is a sweet and pleasant thing, cries the Roman poet, to play the fool in place and right season, *dulce est desipere in loco*. But Mr. Archer's constant departures into irrational

extravagance are not by any means *in loco*. We discover very soon, — in addition to his illegitimate motive and his deliberate unfairness, this is a third and worst cardinal defect, — that for the most part he knew absolutely nothing about the things on which he was passing his confident damnatory judgements... his one genuine and native contribution is the cheery cocksureness of his secondhand opinions. The book is a journalistic fake, not an honest critical production.²

And yet it is this book that is no book, this fake that is a sackful of tortuous misrepresentation, this jaundiced “rationalist” onslaught on Indian culture that has occasioned Sri Aurobindo’s own “aggressive defence”, a defence that is not only a call to new creation but is itself creative criticism at its best.

And, first, how was it possible at all to pose the question “Is India civilised?” — as if the obvious answer could only be an emphatic “No!” Better to define one’s terms at the outset: what is “civilisation”? and what is “culture”? Here Sri Aurobindo at once touches the heart of the controversy:

A true happiness in this world is the right terrestrial aim of man, and true happiness lies in the finding and maintenance of a natural harmony of spirit, mind and body. A culture is to be valued to the extent to which it has discovered the right key of this harmony and organised its expressive motives and movements. And a civilisation must be judged by the manner in which all its principles, ideas, forms, ways of living work to bring that harmony out, manage its rhythmic play and secure its con-

² *The Foundations of Indian Culture* (1953), pp. 51-2.

tinuance or the development of its motives. A civilisation in pursuit of this aim may be predominantly material like modern European culture, predominantly mental and intellectual like the old Graeco-Roman, or predominantly spiritual like the still persistent culture of India.³

The present contrast, then, is between the Western science-based materialist civilisation and India's "still persistent" spiritual culture. Before we venture to decide which is the better of the two, we should begin by acknowledging their honourable separative existence without summarily damning one as barbarous and extolling the other as the only possible civilisation. Unfortunately, in a discussion like this that should be conducted on an informed intellectual level, politics often romps in to confuse the issues. That the British (a Western power) happened to rule India at the time didn't by itself prove that Western civilisation was superior at all points to India's; but not only imperialist spokesmen intoxicated by the sense of power, even many Indians too felt hypnotised by the West's political ascendancy and castigated unreservedly India's "decadent" civilisation. On the other hand, the reform movements of the nineteenth century and the spiritual phenomenon of Ramakrishna and his disciple Vivekananda's sensational appearance at Chicago gave the needed break, opened the world's eyes to the persisting vitality of India's spiritual culture, and there was no reason to be apologetic or defeatist as before. Sri Aurobindo thought that the time had come to ask the right questions about culture and to formulate answers in a spirit of "aggressive defence":

This question of Indian civilisation, once it has

³ *ibid.*, p. 4.

raised this great issue, shifts from its narrow meaning and disappears into a much larger problem. Does the future of humanity lie in a culture founded solely upon reason and science?... Or is not the truth of our being rather that of a Soul embodied in Nature which is seeking to know itself, to find itself, to enlarge its consciousness, to arrive at a greater way of existence, to progress in the spirit and grow into the full light of self-knowledge and some divine inner perfection?⁴

Whatever may have been the petrified attitudes of the past on the East-West question, in the twentieth century the world was awakening at last, both to the insufficiency of reason and science and technology, and to the possibilities promised by the integral Indian view that made spirituality the bass of the whole music of existence. And the very necessity for an "aggressive defence" of the Indian view would make it incumbent on the advocate to take a larger perspective view as well:

Certainly we must repel with vigour every disintegrating or injurious attack; but it is much more important to form our own true and independent view of our own past achievement, present position and future possibilities, — what we were, what we are and what we may be.... Our sense of the greatness of our past must not be made a fatally hypnotising lure to inertia; it should be rather an inspiration to renewed and greater achievement.⁵

If there had been triumphs, there had been failures too, even catastrophic reverses; and a critical review of both must help us to draw the right lessons so that we may be in a position, from a sure ground of self-

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 16-7. ⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39.

knowledge, to take a leap into the future:

If we are to live at all, we must resume India's great interrupted endeavour; we must take up boldly and execute thoroughly in the individual and in the society, in the spiritual and in the mundane life, in philosophy and religion, in art and literature, in thought, in political and economic and social formulation the full and unlimited sense of her highest spirit and knowledge.⁶

It was with these large aims, and not in any narrow spirit of disputation, that Sri Aurobindo launched upon this "aggressive defence" that is, perhaps, more correctly described as an impassioned exercise in global comprehension.

But of course it is inevitable, since Archer had cast himself in the role of Devil's Advocate, that his head should show up from time to time above the even surface of the argument; it is as though he provides the Purvapaksha for Sri Aurobindo's Siddhanta. It is not necessary to follow the debate all along the way, for even two or three citations would reveal the measure of Archer's critical ineptitude. For example, Archer's opinion of Sita that she is so excessive in her virtue "as to verge on immorality" elicits Sri Aurobindo's comment that "meaningless smart extravagance has reached its highest point when it can thus verge on the idiotic".⁷ Faced with exhibitions of such monumental obtuseness, Sri Aurobindo can hardly hide his exasperation, but he is also anxious to get behind the skin of this stupidity and perversity, and discover if he can the bone-structure supporting such a sustained asinine muscularity of invective against Indian culture. Quite simply, Indian

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 44. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 55.

spirituality — the surge and rise of the soul in man to the Truth, the Right, the Vast (*satyam-ṛtam-bṛhat*) at the heart of all existence — is the red rag to Archer's bullish "rationality". The only brand of "spirituality" that Archer can recognise is a high Rajasic activity or the Homeric type of heroism and noble endurance, and hence he needs must belittle Indian life and literature:

The calm and compassion of Buddha victorious over ignorance and suffering, the meditation of the thinker tranced in communion with the Eternal, lifted above the seekings of thought into identity with a supreme Light, the rapture of the saint made one by love in the pure heart with the transcendent and universal Love, the will of the Karmayogin raised above egoistic desire and passion into the impersonality of the divine and universal Will, these things on which India has set the highest value and which have been the supreme endeavour of her greatest spirits, are not sane, not virile.⁸

Archer is allergic to philosophy, and particularly to India's inward-looking spiritual philosophy. Measuring the creations of Indian art and literature with a yardstick fashioned by Mammon in Science's forge and on Moloch's anvil, Archer finds everything Indian a negation of culture and a denial of life. An excessive emphasis on the elusive claims of the Spirit: a religion that sports polytheism with a reckless extravagance and permits too great a chasm to divide ethical precepts from actual practice: a ruling attitude that is pessimistic, obscurantist and riddled with superstitions: an addiction to the theories of Karma and Reincarnation that minimises the

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 75.

importance of the present life and encourages an extreme inertia and an enervating other-worldliness — these are among the major counts in the “self-constituted prosecuting judge” Mr. Archer’s indictment, and “Mr. Archer” is merely shorthand for a whole school of denigration, primarily of Western origin no doubt, but not lacking its Indian practitioners. From the general counts, presently, flows particular and painstaking criticism in respect of Indian poetry, art, and Indian life — and accordingly, Sri Aurobindo too states the Siddhanta with a lucid clarity, force of authority, and apposite and adequate marshalling of detail. Even as the criticism is general as well as particular, the “aggressive defence” too has the same dual cast.

Did Indian religious thought really preach universal asceticism or a total flight from life? Sri Aurobindo points out that ordinarily — in the Indian way of life — *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation) comes as a feat of transcendence out of the fullness of the other three, *kāma* (enjoyment), *artha* (material well-being) and *dharma* (right conduct); “there was no preaching of a general rush to the cave and the hermitage”.⁹ Again, was the characteristic Indian attitude corrosively pessimistic — or more pessimistic than, say, Western or Christian thought? A divine discontent with the normal concert of human activities is not pessimism, and the hope of “a luminous ascent into godhead” is not pessimistic either. Nor are pessimism and asceticism peculiar to India, and the central point to be pressed is that “Indian spirituality in its greatest eras and in its inmost significance has not been a tired quietism or a conventional monasticism, but a high effort of the human spirit to rise beyond the life

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 79.

of desire and vital satisfaction and arrive at an acme of spiritual calm, greatness, strength, illumination, divine realisation, settled peace and bliss".¹⁰ And so with the other charges: irrationality and incipient or open immorality, the hiatus between what is said and what is done, the flight from responsibility, and the total defeatism in the face of current challenges and the alarming uncertainties of the future. Alas for the West: the Age of Reason and Science had by slow gradations emptied life of all mystery and towering hope, pinned the circuit of activity to an almost exclusive preoccupation with what is visible and tangible and graspable, and reached "the atheistic or agnostic cult of secularism, the acme of denial, the zenith of the positive intelligence".¹¹ How could that mentality of material all-sufficiency cope with the imponderables of the Indian view of life, its relativities, its stairway of possibilities and its integral spiritual vision? Feeling confused and in a desperate effort to hide the confusion, an Archer can only make faces and shout abuses, — an extreme Western reaction to the West-East confrontation: for the Western mind, in its attempt to grapple with the Indian, "finds that all its standards are denied, exceeded or belittled; all that it honours is given a second place, all that it has rejected is still held in honour".¹² There is "the still surviving force of Indian religion, thought, culture" that laves in the Infinite, sees the Divine behind the phenomenal play, dares the great adventure of invading the Invisible and makes a mighty science of the experiences of Yoga.

Sri Aurobindo concedes that Western culture, although "narrow at the top, shut in under a heavy lid, poor in its horizons, too much of the soil",¹³ is still imbued with

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 86. ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 97. ¹² *ibid.*, p. 98. ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 110.

a strenuous and noble purpose. But Indian culture has sworn by other standards, and had grown other dimensions of understanding and realisation. It had had its early period of pristine spiritual flowering — then gone through a period of strong intellectuality — and finally stumbled upon an age of progressive decadence of the outer structure. But even in its degenerate days the embers of the old vitality had remained unextinguished, and the shock of the blast from the West had brought a reviving breeze as well, and the old force has been lately asserting itself once again. And one judged a nation's culture, not by its perversions or its decadent futilities, but rather by its positive achievements and the promise it held for the future. What, then, was the image of Indian civilisation and culture in its heyday, as image tarnished indeed in later times, but not wholly invisible, nor wholly without its power of inspiration:

...a thing rich, splendid and unique. While it filled the view with the last mountain prospect of a supreme spiritual elevation, it did not neglect the life of the levels. It lived between the busy life of the city and village, the freedom and seclusion of the forest and the last overarching illimitable ether. Moving firmly between life and death it saw beyond both and cut out a hundred high roads to immortality. It developed the external nature and drew it into the inner self; it enriched life to raise it into the spirit. Thus founded, thus trained, the ancient Indian race grew to astonishing heights of culture and civilisation; it lived with a noble, well-based, ample and vigorous order and freedom; it developed a great literature, sciences, arts, crafts, industries; it rose to the highest possible ideals and

no mean practice of knowledge and culture, of arduous greatness and heroism, of kindness, philanthropy and human sympathy and oneness; it laid the inspired basis of wonderful spiritual philosophies; it examined the secrets of external nature and discovered and lived the boundless and miraculous truths of the inner being; it fathomed itself and understood and possessed the world.¹⁴

Two thousand or more years later — after the periods of further enrichment and complexity, artificiality and stratification, self-indulgence and accelerated self-enfeeblement, asceticism and defeatist hostility to life — the memories of our spiritual birth and state returned fitfully but often enough to prevent the soul of the nation from being smothered out, and now in India's reviving hour of a new Dawn we see that old force asserting itself once again in all its native strength "to give the impulse of a great renaissance".¹⁵

III

We are now launched at last on the all-absorbing theme: a facet-by-facet study of Indian culture, historical as well as interpretative, illuminated by revealing beams of comparative criticism: an eighteen-chapter sequence entitled "A Defence of Indian Culture", yet much more than a "defence", — rather is it a re-statement, a robust stock-taking, and almost a tonic manifesto for the future. The four roughly equivalent sections are devoted to 'Religion and Spirituality', 'Indian Art', 'Indian Literature' and 'Indian Polity' respectively. Four

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 133. ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 134.

self-sufficient sections these, but united by the underground waters of the Spirit: the one power, the one inspiration, is seen to achieve varied self-expression, a satisfying play of multiplicity originating from a single fount of all-sustaining energy. It is like wave following wave, advancing and retreating and advancing again; the chapters had originally appeared in the *Arya* month after month, and this alternate glancing backward and cantering forward became necessary to call the reader's attention and carry it easily onward. There is thus a rhythm in the seeming reiterations, and this too is part of the fascination of the work and augments its expository charm and power of persuasion.

The initial difficulty that militates against an understanding of Hinduism is that it seems to be many things to many people. Has it a single scripture like the Bible or the Koran? a single Founder like the Buddha, Christ or Mahomet? "The only thing fixed, rigid, positive, clear is the social law", says Sri Aurobindo; "and even that varies in different castes, regions, communities".¹⁶ No wonder Dr. Ambedkar once said, stung by exasperation, that Hinduism is not a religion, but a contagious disease! But that is not the truth either. To help us out of our perplexity, Sri Aurobindo isolates certain essential strands in the bewilderingly complex web of Hindu religious thought and practice. There is, first, the belief in an omnipresent Reality; there is, second, the individual's acceptance of the need for inner development and outer discipline; third, the practice of one of the prescribed religious or spiritual disciplines with a view to Grace or Knowledge; and, fourth, conformity to the laws of individual and collective life. For the Hindu,

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 139.

then, "all life and thought are in the end a means of progress towards self-realisation and God-realisation".¹⁷ And one particular feature of Indian religion has been the periodic occurrence of "messengers of the Spirit" — Nammalvar, Andal, Manikkavasagar, Tukaram, Kabir, Mira, Sankara Deva and Nanak — who were minstrels of God and ambassadors of the Absolute. But although many were these witnesses, these Seers, Rishis, Alvars, Acharyas, Prahladas, although many notes make the marvellous symphony of Indian religious aspiration and realisation, still there is the great bass too, the *śruti*, the etheric ambience supporting the multitudinous play: the three-stringed harmony of the affirmation of the One, the manifoldness of approach to Him and the secret of the soul's sanctuary, for the Divine were best invoked and realised there. "These three things put together", says Sri Aurobindo, "are the whole of Hindu religion, its essential sense and, if any creed is needed, its credo".¹⁸

Man has a soul, and it is one with the Divine; to awaken man to this Truth and help him to realise it is the whole aim of Indian religion and spirituality. The Veda with its symbol-pointers and seer-wisdoms, the Upanishads with their lightning flashes and leaps of thought, the Gita with its high-arching reasoning and culminating revelation, Purana and Tantra with their more pronouncedly rich and complex appeal to the human psyche, all addressed themselves to the same elemental task of man's self-transcendence, only the changing times compelling a change in the terminology. The basic Hindu or Indian assumptions have always been that man is more than animal, that this flawed life

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 143. ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 156.

is not the be-all and end-all, and that man carries in himself a divine destiny realisable by one and all: first by living in society in conformity with the accepted Dharma, then by a conscious inner development of the mind and the aesthetic sensibility and the soul, and finally by accomplishing a "breakthrough" to the realm of the Spirit:

Thus we may observe that there was created a Yoga of knowledge for the self-exceeding of the thinking intellectual man, a Yoga of works for the self-exceeding of the active, dynamic and ethical man, a Yoga of love and bhakti for the self-exceeding of the emotional, aesthetic, hedonistic man, by which each arrived to perfection through a self-ward, spiritual, God-ward direction of his own special power....¹⁹

It can be seen that the spiritual aim that made God-realisation or life-transformation in the image of the Divine the goal of life, by the very fact it was the noblest possible aim, imposed a tremendous strain on the aspirants and practitioners, and naturally in its actual working there have been "great limitations, great imperfections"; but that can be no argument against the ideal itself, nor can it abridge the glory of the many leaders of the march. "India has lived and lived greatly, whatever judgement one may pass on her ideas and institutions";²⁰ and the history of her great men is not a record of saints and ecstasies alone, but includes also poets, sculptors, painters, scientists, polymaths, rulers, statesmen, conquerors, administrators. Asoka, Chanakya, Chandragupta, Akbar, Shivaji, Guru Govind Singh, these are in the golden roll-call as much as Gautama Buddha,

¹⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 193-4. ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 207.

Mahavira, Sankara, Ramanuja, Chaitanya, Nanak:

All this mass of action was not accomplished by men without mind and will and vital force, by pale shadows of humanity in whom the vigorous manhood had been crushed out under the burden of a gloomy and all-effacing asceticism, nor does it look like the sign of a metaphysically minded people or dreamers averse to life and action.²¹

India has of course laid great emphasis on the extinction of the egoistic personality, but such extinction has also been the means to the conquest of infinity:

The perfect man, the Siddha or the Buddha, becomes universal, embraces all being in sympathy and oneness, finds himself in others as in himself and by so doing draws into himself at the same time something of the infinite power of a universal energy. That is the positive ideal of Indian culture.²²

Indian art — comprising architecture, sculpture, painting, music, dance and drama — being more an expression of Indian life in its true inwardness with its insistent religious commitment and reserves of the spiritual sublime, than a vivid imaginative imitation of outward reality, has been a constant invitation to Western detractors. The gravamen of the charge is that Indian art is not “realistic”. What do these ancient sculptors mean by giving four arms to Vishnu, eight or ten to Shiva, eighteen to Durga, or three heads to Brahma? Aren’t such images unnatural, aren’t these only masses of “monstrous and abortive miscreation”? Dhanam’s incomparable melodies on the Veena once struck a European missionary at Madras as intolerable cacophony, and bits of classical

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 212. ²² *ibid.*, p. 220.

Western music seem to an untrained Indian as mere immitigable wailing. Anderson's story of the Ugly Duckling is germane to most cavalier judgements on art and literature; alas, the duckling that is adjudged "ugly" is no duckling at all — it is a swan!

Sri Aurobindo was acquainted with European art in its early classical, the renaissance and the recent experimental phases, and also with Chinese, Japanese and Indian art. His intimacy with the Hellenic and the Hindu spirit, and the cultural achievements of the West and the East, gave him the clue to a catholic and universal aesthesis; and his appreciation of art and of individual works of art flowed from a wide background of knowledge as well as an intuitive understanding of motives, media and techniques. It is no small privilege, then, to be initiated by Sri Aurobindo into the oneness and manifoldness of art and the arts — their converging ultimate origins, their career of divergence from their source, the sovereign powers and difficulties of the several art forms, the unity in diversity in the visions of the Infinite in the divers form-determined finite works of art. There are passages of comparative criticism that only a global comprehension and an infallible eye for right discrimination could have made possible. Sri Aurobindo correctly lays down at the outset that art criticism should first take note of "the spirit, aim, essential motive from which a type of artistic creation starts".²³ No doubt all great art springs ultimately from "an act of intuition". Where, then, begins the immense divergence between Western and Indian art? It can only be in the practical details of the functioning of the intuition, where it works and how and for achieving what results:

²³ *ibid.*, p. 229.

The European artist gets his intuition by a suggestion from an appearance in life and nature or, if it starts from something in his own soul, relates it at once to an external support... (Indian art's) highest business is to disclose something of the Self, the Infinite, the Divine to the regard of the soul, the Self through its expressions, the Infinite through its living finite symbols, the Divine through his powers.... A seeing in the self accordingly becomes the characteristic method of the Indian artist....²⁴

There are two ways of "covering" a circle. One can start from a point on the circumference, dive and grope towards the centre — or be diverted to the circumference again! In its own way, it is an interesting experience, and it could be a fascinating one as well. On the other hand, one may start from the centre, and wind one's way to the circumference — or rather, take a leap from the centre, in one mad canter as it were, to the farthest point on the circumference. Of course, analogies are not the whole truth, but this nearly hits the mark. Aesthetic insight is enough to take the measure of a European work of art, but spiritual insight too is needed if one is to take in the full meaning — the spiralling connotation — of a typical Indian artistic creation grounded on the Spirit.

Aside from the originating "intuition", there is also the enveloping force of "form", for "all art reposes on some unity and its details, whether few and sparing or lavish and crowded and full, must go back to that unity and help its significance; otherwise it is not art".²⁵ There is striking difference between the massive and gorgeous architecture of the South Indian temples (those at

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 235-6. ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 243.

Chidambaram, Conjeevaram, Madura, Tanjore and Srirangam, for example), the immediate opulence of the Gothic cathedrals and the utter and noble simplicity of the Parthenon, but each style has its own distinctive "form", significant enough in relation to its purpose, and the world of art would be very poor indeed if a single style electronically operated everywhere. In the following passage, Sri Aurobindo states the criteria of the different styles without condemning any:

Now it may be readily admitted that the failure to see at once the unity of this (Indian) architecture is perfectly natural to a European eye, because unity in the sense demanded by the Western conception, the Greek unity gained by much suppression and a sparing use of detail and circumstance or even the Gothic unity got by casting everything into the mould of a single spiritual aspiration, is not there. And the greater unity that really is there can never be arrived at at all, if the eye begins and ends by dwelling on form and detail and ornament, because it will then be obsessed by these things and find it difficult to go beyond to the unity which all this in its totality serves, not so much to express in itself, but to fill it with that which comes out of it and relieve its oneness by multitude. An original oneness, not a combined or synthetic or an effected unity, is that from which this art begins and to which its work when finished returns or rather lives in it as in its self and natural atmosphere. Indian sacred architecture constantly represents the greatest oneness of the self, the cosmic, the infinite in the immensity of its world-design, the multitude of its features of self-express-

sion, *lakṣaṇa*, (yet the oneness is greater than and independent of their totality and in itself indefinable), and all its starting-point of unity in conception, its mass of design and immensity of material, its crowding abundance of significant ornament and detail and its return towards oneness are only intelligible as necessary circumstances of this poem, this epic or this lyric — for there are smaller structures which are such lyrics — of the Infinite.²⁶

After sprawling towns and smoky cities have grown round many of these ancient temples, it is becoming difficult if not impossible to look at such architectural marvels as they are intended to be. The Japanese, Sri Aurobindo reminds us, have wisely raised their temples and installed their Buddhas “as often as possible away on mountains and in distant or secluded scenes of Nature and avoid living with great paintings in the crude hours of daily life”.²⁷ Perhaps, it is easier to appreciate the mystical tremendum of Indian sacred architecture by viewing in a mood of tranced attention the temples at Kalahasti and Simhachalam:

The straight way here is not to detach the temple from its surroundings, but to see it in unity with the sky and low-lying landscape or with the sky and hills around and feel the thing common to both, the construction and its environment, the reality in Nature, the reality expressed in the work of art.... There is in both a constant, subtle yet pronounced lessening from the base towards the top, but at each stage a repetition of the same form, the same multiplicity of insistence, the same

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 245-6. ²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 241.

crowded fullness and indented relief, but one maintains its multiple endeavour and indication to the last, the other ends in a single sign.... Not absence of unity, but a tremendous unity is revealed.²⁸

In such hallowed spots at least it is still possible to see those ecstasies in stone, not in the cavalier mood of sight-seer curiosity (with cameras clicking all the time), but "in loneliness, in the solitude of one's self, in moments when one is capable of long and deep meditation and as little weighted as possible with the conventions of material life".²⁹ Man and Nature and God are then inseparable to our understanding, and the One and the Many, the visible and the invisible, seem lost in the ineffable experience of harmony and peace. And as for the great architectural wonders of the Mughal period, isn't the Taj — when seen with an intuition matching the intuition in which it had its origin — "not merely a sensuous reminiscence of an imperial amour or a fairy enchantment hewn from the moon's lucent quarries, but the eternal dream of a love that survives death?"³⁰ The great mosques, too, incarnate a noble religious aspiration, and the tombs "reach beyond death to the beauty and joy of Paradise".

In sculpture and painting, again, without the key to a catholic and universal aesthesis, it would be difficult to get at the heart of the masterpieces of all times and all countries. What you look for is not what the artist has intended, and you pull a long face, or you grunt your irritations and sore disappointments; you have no patience, no inclination, no inner resilience to find the motivation behind the work of art and to establish rapport with it. Is one to look in sculpture only for ana-

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 246-7. ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 241. ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 254.

tomy, or an exact reproduction of a fact of natural science? Realism, naturalism, pre-Raphaelitism, impressionism, cubism, surrealism, in their several ways all are valid enough renderings of Reality. Indian sculpture and painting—at least the best of it—has had its origins in the depths of the human soul, and then alone risen to the vital and mental levels, to fulfil itself at last in a radiant, if not always rounded, perfection in terms of form and rhythm and line and colour. Originating in the soul, such art appeals also to the soul. And when the coldly rationalistic Archer tries to weigh and consider this art and comment upon it, he can hardly avoid presenting the “spectacle of a blind man discoursing on colours”.³¹ Now turn to Sri Aurobindo, and what a difference! Here he is writing of the sculptures of the Olympian and the Indian gods:

The Olympian gods of Phidias are magnified and uplifted human beings saved from a too human limitation by a certain divine calm of impersonality or universalised quality, divine type, *guna*; in other work we see heroes, athletes, feminine incarnations of beauty, calm and restrained embodiments of idea, action or emotion in the idealised beauty of the human figure. The gods of Indian sculpture are cosmic beings, embodiments of some great spiritual power, spiritual idea and action, inmost psychic significance, the human form a vehicle of this soul meaning, its outward means of self-expression.... The divine self in us is its theme, the body made a form of the soul is its idea and its secret.³²

Again, in a review of O. C. Gangoly's *South Indian*

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 223.

³² *ibid.*, pp. 260-1.

Bronzes, Sri Aurobindo makes the point more tellingly still:

These deities are far removed indeed from the Greek and the Christian conceptions; they do not live in the world at all, but in themselves, in the infinite. The form is, as it were, a wave in which the whole ocean of being expresses itself.... But always one has to look, not at the form, but through and into it to see that which has seized and informed it... most art expresses the play of Prakriti; Buddhistic art in its most characteristic creations expresses the absolute repose of the Purusha; Hindu art tends to combine the Purusha and Prakriti in one image... this is the motive of the Nataraja, the Dancing Shiva... the self-absorbed concentration, the motionless peace and joy are within, outside is the whole mad bliss of the cosmic movement.³³

In painting, too, it is the same story. Sri Aurobindo feels he has not been able to steep himself in the spirit of the European renaissance art, as in the Hellenic; and this is the reason why he is more at home in a Greek Aphrodite than in Tintoretto's paintings like Adam and Eve or St. George slaying the Dragon:

I am aware of standing baffled and stopped by an irresponsive blankness somewhere in my being.... When I try to analyse my failure, I find at first certain conceptions which conflict with my expectations or my own way of seeing. This muscular Adam, the sensuous beauty of this Eve, do not bring home to me the mother or father of the race, this Dragon seems to me only a surly portentous

³³ *Views and Reviews* (1946), pp. 51-3.

beast in great danger of being killed, not a creative embodiment of monstrous evil.... But the cause of my failure is there, that I am seeking for something which was not meant in the spirit of this art and which I ought not to expect from its characteristic creation.³⁴

Indeed, Sri Aurobindo is just and more than just, and would rather attribute his failure to appreciate a work of art to an inappropriate approach on his own part than to a deficiency in the picture itself in its own level of execution. And so he says elsewhere: "The perspective, the psychic vision of the Chinese and Japanese painters are not the same as those of European artists; but who can ignore the beauty and the wonder of their work?"³⁵

All discussions on Indian painting must start — and end — with the Ajanta marvels. Even in their ruins they are a silent reminder to us that at one time — two thousand years ago — the whole country must have witnessed a similar splendour of artistic activity. This means a tradition of at least two millenniums, placing Indian painting on a par with Indian architecture and sculpture. Buddhist, Hindu and later Rajput painters — amidst all the changes in style — reveal nevertheless the oneness and continuity of all Indian art and its essential spiritual tradition. Unlike sculpture, which has to wrestle with a more intractable medium, painting with the freedom that comes from the use of colours is able to "dwell on the mobilities of the soul rather than on its static eternities". Here Sri Aurobindo elaborates the difference between sculpture and painting, as Lessing had done earlier in his contrastive study of Laocoon in

³⁴ *Foundations*, pp. 231-2.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 268.

the python's coils by the poet and the sculptor respectively:

The sculptor must express always in static form; the idea of the spirit is cut out for him in mass and line, significant in the stability of its insistence, and he can lighten the weight of this insistence but not get rid of it or away from it; for him eternity seizes hold of time in its shapes and arrests it in the monumental spirit of stone or bronze. The painter on the contrary lavishes his soul in colour and there is a liquidity in the form, a fluent grace of subtlety in the line he uses which imposes on him a more mobile and emotional way of self-expression.... There is less of the austerity of Tapasya in his way of working... but there is in compensation a moved wealth of psychic or warmth of vital suggestion, a lavish delight of the beauty of the play of the eternal in the moments of time....³⁶

The Indian painter, exploiting to the full the scope, turn and possibility of his medium, finds it a fascinating means for rendering the fluidities and exaltations and openings and soarings of the human soul caught in the ambience of the Eternal. He begins where the average Western painter usually ends, the soul's stirrings towards sovereignty; and Sri Aurobindo singles out for particular comment the adoration group of the Mother and Child before the Buddha, "one of the most profound, tender and noble of the Ajanta masterpieces". The moment the painter has successfully caught is the child's awakening (as the mother has already awakened) to the spiritual joy of adoration of the Buddha:

...the motive of the soul moment the painting in-

³⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 274-5.

terprets is the dedication of the awakening mind of the child, the coming younger humanity, to that in which already the soul of the mother has learned to find and fix its spiritual joy. The eyes, brows, lips, face, poise of the head of the woman are filled with this spiritual emotion which is a continued memory and possession of the psychical release, the steady settled calm of the heart's experience filled with an ineffable tenderness, the familiar depths which are yet moved with the wonder and always farther appeal of something that is infinite, the body and other limbs are grave masses of this emotion and in their poise a basic embodiment of it, while the hands prolong it in the dedicative putting forward of her child to meet the Eternal. This contact of the human and eternal is repeated in the smaller figure with a subtly and strongly indicated variation, the glad and childlike smile of awakening which promises but not yet possesses the depths that are to come.... The two figures have at each point the same rhythm, but with a significant difference.³⁷

Of the painting of the Great Renunciation, again, Sri Aurobindo speaks with a thrilled imaginative insight, finding in the picture nothing purely personal but everything poignantly universal, the agony and unreality of the world and the anguished seeking for a way out; "hence the immense calm and restraint that support the sorrow, in the true bliss of Nirvana".³⁸ These chapters on Indian architecture, sculpture and painting are the quintessence of art criticism, and the Indian student as well as the unbiassed Westerner will find in these pages

³⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 283-4. ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 286.

insights and explorations of immeasurable value.

Then follow five chapters on Indian literature, the first three being devoted to the Veda, the Upanishads and the two great epics — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* — respectively; the fourth, to Kalidasa and the poets of the Classical age, and the last, to Purana and Tantra, to the Tamil poets, and the minstrels of God all over the country. What Sri Aurobindo is attempting is nothing less than a bird's-eye-view of a three-thousand-year old fairly continuous and reasonably diversified literary tradition. It is not, of course, Professor Dryasdust doling out dates and engineering whirls of names, currents, cross-currents, trends, movements, tendencies and reactions; what we have instead is a quick voyage of discovery — or animated re-discovery — of the great landmarks, the lighthouses, the hills rich with green and the lakes full of life-renewing waters. As elsewhere, here too the ghost of Archer makes a momentary appearance. He would seem to have missed everything essential and made mock of what he had deliberately misunderstood, or what is merely peripheral or casual. Sri Aurobindo's reply takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* in reverse:

The fit parallel to this motive and style of criticism would be if an Indian critic who had read European literature only in bad or ineffective Indian translations, were to pass it under a hostile and disparaging review, dismiss the *Iliad* as a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos, Dante's great work as the nightmare of a cruel and superstitious religious fantasy, Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of a considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece and

Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors, French poetry as a succession of bald or tawdry rhetorical exercises and French fiction as a tainted and immoral thing, a long sacrifice on the altar of the goddess of Lubricity, admit here and there a minor merit, but make no attempt at all to understand the central spirit or aesthetic quality or principle of structure and conclude on the strength of his own absurd method that the ideals of both Pagan and Christian Europe were altogether false and bad and its imagination afflicted with a "habitual and ancestral" earthiness, morbidity, poverty and disorder. No criticism would be worth making on such a mass of absurdities....³⁹

Having thus exorcised the comic ghost of Archer, Sri Aurobindo turns to the Veda, which is "a remarkable, a sublime and powerful poetic creation" by Rishis (a Vishvamitra, a Vamadeva, a Dhirghatamas) touching "the most extraordinary heights and amplitudes of a sublime mystic poetry".⁴⁰ The constant feeling of the presence of the Infinite, the sixth sense to see and render this Presence through multifoliate imagery drawn from the psychic plane, and the leap of intuition that repeatedly achieves the transcendence of the terrestrial into vaster spiritual realms: these three distinguishing marks of the best Vedic poetry provide also the inspiration for all the best Indian poetry to come.

The Upanishads add a more specifically intellectual dimension to the poetry and the speculation, but they also connect with the higher spiritual thought of the civilised world, ancient and modern:

The ideas of the Upanishads can be discovered

³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 290-1. ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 292,302.

in much of the thought of Pythagoras and Plato and form the profoundest part of Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism with all their considerable consequences to the philosophical thinking of the West, and Sufism only repeats them in another religious language. The larger part of German metaphysics is little more in substance than an intellectual development of great realities more spiritually seen in this ancient teaching, and modern thought is rapidly absorbing them with a closer, more living and intense receptiveness.... There is hardly a main philosophical idea which cannot find an authority or a seed or an indication in these antique writings.... And even the larger generalisations of Science are constantly found to apply to the truth of physical Nature formulas already discovered by the Indian sages in their original, their largest meaning in the deeper truth of the spirit.⁴¹

The Upanishads, it must be admitted, are not all of a piece: there are the shorter metrical Upanishads, and there are the discursive tropically-rich Upanishads: and often story, fable, debate, hair-splitting, poetry, all co-exist cheek by jowl. But on a total view, it is a legacy unparalleled elsewhere; and, besides, they reveal to us the contours of an extraordinary society, a unique culture, a rare intellectual and spiritual camaraderie:

The scenes of the old world live before us in a few pages, the sages sitting in their groves ready to test and teach the comer, princes and learned Brahmins and great landed nobles going about in search of knowledge, the king's son in his chariot and the illegitimate son of the servant-girl, seeking

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 306.

any man who might carry in himself the thought of light and the word of revelation, the typical figures and personalities. Janaka and the subtle mind of Ajatashatru, Raikwa of the cart, Yajnavalkya militant for truth, calm and ironic, taking to himself with both hands without attachment worldly possessions and spiritual riches and casting at last all his wealth behind to wander forth as a houseless ascetic. Krishna son of Devaki who heard a single word of the Rishi Ghora and knew at once the Eternal, the Ashramas, the courts of kings who were also spiritual discoverers and thinkers, the great sacrificial assemblies where the sages met and compared their knowledge. And we see how the soul of India was born and how arose this great birth-song in which it soared from its earth into the supreme empyrean of the spirit. The Vedas and the Upanishads are not only the sufficient fountain-head of Indian philosophy and religion, but of all Indian art, poetry and literature.⁴²

Then intervened the age when the Shastras were formulated or codified, but more important were the two great epics, the *Mahabharata* (containing the Gita as well) and the *Ramayana*—which are not primitive edda or saga, nor just heroic epics, but *itihāsas*, chief instruments of popular education and culture that have been moulding people's thought for ages.

It is to little purpose to apply Aristotelean criteria to the structure or action or characters of these enormous poems; these are national epics, odysseys of the soul, reports of the Battle of Dharma, and the chief characters are not just human beings but apocalyptic projec-

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 316-7.

tions of spiritual visions and psychic ecstasies. Great substance is wedded to equally great style — the *Mahabharata* with a sustained manliness of its own, the *Ramayana* with its silken flow and grace and strength and warmth — and perennial indeed is their appeal, and truly inexhaustible their power for shaping human character:

These epics are... a highly artistic representation of intimate significances of life, the living presentment of a strong and noble thinking, a developed ethical and aesthetic mind and a high social and political ideal, the ensouled image of a great culture. As rich in freshness of life but immeasurably more profound and evolved in thought and substance than the Greek, as advanced in maturity of culture but more vigorous and vital and young in strength than the Latin epic poetry, the Indian epic poems were fashioned to serve a greater and completer national and cultural function....⁴³

Sri Aurobindo finds in Kalidasa a poet who ranks with Milton and Virgil, but with "a more subtle and delicate spirit and touch in his art than the English, a greater breath of native power informing and vivifying his execution than the Latin poet"; and *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* is the "most perfect and captivating romantic drama in all literature".⁴⁴

The last of the five chapters unavoidably hurries through the later centuries and takes a sweeping glance at the many regional literatures. The cardinal notes everywhere are spiritual, intuitive and psychic. If the Puranas are essentially a true religious poetry, the Tantras outline "a complete psycho-spiritual and psycho-

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 330-1. ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 337, 345.

physical science of Yoga". The great period of Tamil literature was contemporary with the classical Sanskrit age, and there is brief mention of Tiruvalluvar, Avvai, the Vaishnava and Saiva saint-singers, the great epics of Kamban and Tulsidas, and the proliferation of the Bhakti poetry including that of Nanak and the other Sikh Gurus. Of the poetry of the Radha-Krishna cult, Sri Aurobindo writes:

The desire of the soul for God is there thrown into symbolic figure in the lyrical love cycle of Radha and Krishna, the Nature soul in man seeking for the Divine Soul through love, seized and mastered by his beauty, arrested by his magical flute, abandoning human cares and duties for this one overpowering passion and in the cadence of its phases passing through first desire to the bliss of union, the pangs of separation, the eternal longing and reunion, the *lilā* of the love of the human spirit for God.⁴⁵

It is literary history with a difference, history seen inwardly and integrally in relation to the other arts and the whole matrix of India's evolving life and thought.

IV

In four self-contained chapters of *A Defence of Indian Culture* — now also separately issued as *The Spirit and Form of Indian Polity* (1947) — Sri Aurobindo examines the question whether, for all her manifold achievements in the things of the mind and spirit — in art, in literature, in philosophy and religion

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 359.

— achievements that give us the image of a great civilisation, “one of the half dozen greatest of which we have a still existing record”,⁴⁶ India hasn’t really failed in life, failed in her attempts to forge efficiency on the social, economic and political levels. In other words, isn’t Indian culture and civilisation a failure, a stupendous and magnificent failure perhaps, yet a failure all the same? After a new look at such evidence as may be gathered from literature, from coins, and from the recorded impressions of foreign travellers, Sri Aurobindo finds himself in a position to counter the persistent “legend of India’s political incompetence”. In the remote past, Indian polity — as elsewhere in other early Aryan settlements — was a tribal system founded upon “the equality of all the freemen of the clan or race”.⁴⁷ In course of time, the freely chosen leader became the hereditary King, but his authority still flowed from the collective consent of his people. More than the King, it was the Rishi — who might come from any class — that wielded real authority, and this he did on account of his spiritual personality. Alongside of the Kingdoms, there were also small republican States, and these were “already long established and in vigorous functioning in the sixth century before Christ, contemporary therefore with the brilliant but ephemeral and troubled Greek city commonwealths”.⁴⁸ After the traumatic effects of Alexander’s conquest, there was the impulse towards the unification of the smaller political units, and the monarchical idea became the nucleus of the larger political formations. But till the arrival of the Muslims, the ruler in India was very seldom a pure despot, and he had always to submit to the imperatives of Dharma — “the

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 364. ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 367. ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 371.

religious, ethical, social, political, juridic and customary law organically governing the life of the people"⁴⁹ — which was the impersonal, sacred and eternal authority. An unjust and oppressive King, said Manu, could even be killed by his subjects like a mad dog; and "this justification by the highest authority of the right and even the duty of insurrection and regicide in extreme cases is sufficient to show that absolutism or the unconditional divine right of Kings was no part of the intention of the Indian political system".⁵⁰

So much for the dawn and morning glory of Indian history. But the career of a society, of a nation, is broadly similar to the career, the life-history, of an individual. A nation, even like an individual, "passes through a cycle of birth, growth, youth, ripeness and decline, and if this last stage goes far enough without any arrest of its course towards decadence, it may perish, — even so all the older peoples and nations except India and China perished, — as a man dies of old age".⁵¹ But, then, if there are possibilities of decay and death, there are also possibilities of renewal and growth. A people or a race that learnt the art of living, "not solely in its physical and outward life", says Sri Aurobindo, "but in the soul and spirit behind, may not at all exhaust itself... but having itself fused into its life many original smaller societies and attained to its maximum natural growth pass without death through many renaissances".⁵² Othello says in a famous passage:

...once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 372. ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 376. ⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 378. ⁵² *ibid.*, p. 379.

When the inner spark is extinguished, there is no art, no craft, no science, that can renew that spark, and give life back to the inert body. In the past, India mastered the arts of peace no less than the arts of war — the technique of good government and technique of wise and happy living as well. Theirs was a self-poised and balanced polity, in which the urges of self-interest and hedonistic desire were effectively held in check by the categorical imperatives of Dharma. The political and economic structure was supported by the social compact, which in its turn was reared on immaculate spiritual foundations:

The spiritual mind of India regarded life as a manifestation of the self: the community was the body of the creator Brahma, the people was a life body of Brahman in the *samastī*, the collectivity, it was the collective Narayana, as the individual was Brahman in the *vyastī*, the separate Jiva, the individual Narayana; the King was the living representative of the Divine and the other orders of the community the natural powers of the collective self, *prakṛtayah*. The agreed conventions, institutes, customs, constitution of the body social and politic in all its parts had therefore not only a binding authority but a certain sacrosanct character.⁵³

Ancient Indian polity knew neither industrialism nor parliamentary democracy of the kind that we associate with modern England or America (or, for that matter, post-Independence India). Indian civilisation passed from the simple Aryan community of pre-history, through many transitionary experimental formations in political

⁵³ *ibid.*, pp. 385-6.

structure and synthesis, to the complicated monarchical State —

...a complex of communal freedom and self-determination with a supreme coordinating authority, a sovereign person and body, armed with efficient powers, position and prestige, but limited to its proper rights and functions, at once controlling and controlled by the rest, admitting them as its active co-partners in all branches, sharing the regulation and administration of the communal existence, and all alike, the sovereign, the people and all its constituent communities, bound to the maintenance and restrained by the yoke of the Dharma.⁵⁴

But this delicate balance, so purposive and so fruitful, was upset in course of time, tensions started within, and the impact of foreign cultures completed the disturbance of the old harmony and the old unity. Barbaric invasions for a millennium, alien domination for another millennium, — in the face of these ugly facts, how shall it profit us to make a song about the glory that was Ind?

In the third of the four chapters on Indian Polity, Sri Aurobindo goes into somewhat greater detail — drawing freely upon the researches of scholars like K. P. Jayaswal — about the organisation of government in ancient India, a system that was efficient as well as elastic, and secured authority for the State as well as freedom for the communities constituting the nation. Before the system deteriorated, it permitted and indeed thrived upon the close participation of all the “four orders” in the common life; and as a result there was “a wise and stable synthesis... of all the natural powers and orders,

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 389.

an organic and vital coordination respectful of the free functioning of all the organs of the communal body".⁵⁵ The King with his ministerial Council, the metropolitan assembly and the general assembly of the Kingdom, between them worked a sort of three-tier government that was viable enough till decadence or breakdown overtook it either immediately before, or as a result of, the Muslim invasions. Even so, the South preserved the old polity for some more centuries, till at last the British overran all India and imposed their own bureaucratic regime. The vitality of the old system is nevertheless proved by the fact that it was able to persist so long, and its native strength lay in its complex of "self-determined and self-governing communal bodies",⁵⁶ but as with the way of all flesh, weakness and collapse overwhelmed it in the end:

It was the combination of foreign invasion and conquest with the slow decline and final decadence of the ancient Indian culture that brought about the collapse of considerable parts of the old structure and the degradation and disintegration, with no sufficient means for revival or new creation, of the socio-political life of the people.⁵⁷

A rigid political unity — like the unity of the Persian and Roman Empires of old — was never attempted in ancient India; and had it been attempted successfully, it would not have lasted long. The ideal of conquest held up was not "a destructive and predatory invasion... but a sacrificial progression bringing with it a trial of military strength of which the result was easily accepted because defeat entailed neither humiliation nor servitude and suffering but merely a strengthening adhesion to a

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 396. ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 406. ⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 407.

suzerain power concerned only with establishing the visible unity of the nation and the Dharma".⁵⁸ As our nation-builders wisely structured unity on spiritual and cultural foundations — for that alone is the only enduring unity — India has miraculously survived the shocks of the ages, the long centuries of travail; the spark hasn't been extinguished, and a new India re-enacting her past glory though in conformity with the exacting conditions of today is not quite an impossibility. Sri Aurobindo saw the morning *Yuga-sandhyā* over fifty years ago, and at the present moment when the twilight is lost in the new dawn, the noon of the future cannot long be denied to our aspirations and strivings. But we might find it all Darkness at Noon if we failed to keep steadily before us Sri Aurobindo's guiding light or ignored his stern word of caution:

India of the ages is not dead, nor has she spoken her last creative word; she lives and has still something to do for herself and the human peoples. And that which must seek now to awake is not an Anglicised oriental people, docile pupil of the West and doomed to repeat the cycle of the occident's success and failure, but still the ancient immemorial Shakti recovering her deepest self, lifting her head higher towards the supreme source of light and strength and turning to discover the complete meaning and a vaster form of her Dharma.⁵⁹

If the India of long past ages had built on the foundation of the spiritual mind and the broad and durable framework of Dharma a great and stable civilisation and a free and noble people, ancient Greece developed to a remarkable extent intellectual reason and form and

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 421. ⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 430.

beauty, ancient Rome likewise grew on power and patriotism and law and order, and the modern Western world has been exploiting to the uttermost practical reason and economic growth and science and technology. But the future has still other and greater tasks and still richer possibilities, and would need all these and still other powers. The renaissance in India that began a century and a half ago, and more vigorously with the turn of the present century, is still determining itself — it is not yet, almost twenty-five years after independence, finally defined or determined. On the one hand, India must not lose touch with her own soul; and on the other, India can survive and make good only by confronting squarely the raw, aggressive, powerful Western world, not by resorting to blind imitation or the creation of a “bastard twy-natured culture” (which will be a no-natured culture), but by adopting the policy of selective acceptance and assimilation, practising the art of *ātmāsātkaṛaṇa* or “assimilative appropriation”. A double strategy is thus called for so that future India could be both *svarāṭ* and *samrāṭ*:

Therefore to live in one’s self, determining one’s self-expression from one’s own centre of being in accordance with one’s own law of being, *svadharma*, is the first necessity. Not to be able to do that means disintegration of the life; not to do it sufficiently means languor, weakness, inefficiency, the danger of being oppressed by the environing forces and overborne; not to be able to do it wisely, intuitively, with a strong use of one’s inner material and inner powers, means confusion, disorder and finally decline and loss of vitality. But also not to be able to use the material that the life around

offers us, not to lay hold on it with an intuitive selection and a strong mastering assimilation is a serious deficiency and a danger to the existence.⁶⁰

The renaissance in India in the wake of the British impact was not like the European renaissance, awakening to the old Greco-Roman spirit; a closer parallel would be the Celtic renaissance. A great past had been followed by a period of decline, and the coming of the West meant the stir of new life and fresh creation. In the first flush of excitement, there was free inquiry, the old culture was reconsidered in the light of the new ideas, and much of it was found wanting. After the initial excitement had passed, there was an interfusion of the new and the old, the primacy of the West was no more accepted as a matter of course, and in the work of Bankim Chandra, Tagore and their contemporaries in Bengal and elsewhere, and in the vision of Vivekananda, a synthesis was attempted. Still later, there have been attempts at fresh and new creation, as distinct from mere synthesis or reconstruction. The Japanese renaissance in the nineteenth century had brought about a swift modernisation through rapid industrialisation. But the real India has always lived in the spirit, and here the renaissance couldn't be achieved through a wholesale outer change alone. Ultimate success would thus depend on the extent to which a deeply spiritual turn is given to all our activities. Indian spirituality has never meant a heady flight from life, and hasn't been wedded to dogma or asceticism or mere sectarianism. On the contrary, it is an all-inclusive or integral force of beco-

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 438-9 (From the essay on 'Indian Culture and External Influence' which appeared in the *Arya*, Vol. V, No. 8, and now reprinted in *Foundations*).

ming, comprising matter, life, mind, and implying fullness, wholeness and harmony, and striving towards a creative universal consciousness. Indian art, literature, science, polity should provide a beneficent framework within which one's real self could be sought and grown into the image of the Divine, and the truly cultured Indian would try to become increasingly the embodiment of the divine law and being in everyday life. In the concluding passage of *The Renaissance in India*, Sri Aurobindo has summed up his great hope for India when the renaissance would have perhaps fulfilled itself:

We should... apply our spirituality on broader and freer lines... open ourselves to the throb of life, the pragmatic activity, the great modern endeavour, but not therefore abandon our fundamental view of God and man and Nature.... India has the key to the knowledge and conscious application of the ideal; what was dark to her before in its application, she can now, with a new light, illumine; what was wrong and wry in her old methods she can now rectify; the fences which she created to protect the outer growth of the spiritual ideal and which afterwards became barriers to its expansion and farther application, she can now break down and give her spirit a freer field and an ampler flight: she can, if she will, give a new and decisive turn to the problems over which all mankind is labouring and stumbling, for the clue to their solutions is there in her ancient knowledge.⁶¹

Following the lead of the pioneers and the light from Sri Aurobindo, the Indian race could make a collective advance towards the Knowledge, Power, Harmony and

⁶¹ *The Renaissance in India* (4th edition, 1951), pp. 72-3, 76.

Unity. But whether the New India will actually reach these goals is still for the future to unfold.

V

Of Sri Aurobindo's other contributions to the *Arya*, the two major sequences, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Future Poetry* (the latter being a critical history of English poetry that started as a book-review), will be discussed more appropriately in two of the later chapters. There are some minor sequences and collections too, *Heraclitus*, *The Superman*, *Evolution*, *Views and Reviews* and *Thoughts and Glimpses*. There are, again, perceptive pieces of criticism like Sri Aurobindo's review-article on Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's first book of poems, *The Feast of Youth* (1918), another review-article on H. G. Wells's *God, the Invisible King*, a review of the journal *Shama'a* with a gallant defence of Professor Radhakrishnan ("well known as a perfectly competent philosophic critic and thinker") against the ill-tempered attack by one J. B. Raju, and a review of another journal *Sanskrit Research* with Sri Aurobindo's comments on articles by Tilak and R. D. Ranade, which are now included in Volume 17 (*The Hour of God*) of Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library. In the same volume appear Sri Aurobindo's articles on the two poets of *bhakti* — Nammalvar and Andal — who are held in great veneration by the Tamils. Take it all in all, the *Arya* heritage is a formidable body of writing, and knowledge and wisdom, variety and versatility, are its distinguishing marks. There is not a page but hits the eye with its own sparkling gems of thought, its glow of purpose,

or its radiance of peace. It is verily a global — a universal — consciousness that is displayed everywhere, it is the voice of indubitable authority that is heard, it is the sovereign assurance of a Master that is communicated to a distracted world. It would be fitting, however, to make a special reference to *Heraclitus*, rather an unusual book; but this little treatise too will be seen to fall into right relation with the rest of the canon, just another chord that contributes to the magnificent Aurobindonian symphony.

Heraclitus appeared serially in the *Arya* during 1916-7; having begun as a review of R. D. Ranade's paper on the philosophy of Heraclitus, it presently expanded into a fresh study of the Greek philosopher of the sixth century B. C., whose cryptic sayings have exercised such a strange fascination for posterity. Himself a profound student of Greek literature and thought, Sri Aurobindo is here on ground quite familiar to him, and his reading of Heraclitus has thus a very special value for the modern reader. Heraclitus was evidently teased by the "first and last things" of philosophy, and the lines of his reasoning seem to be reminiscent of some of the boldest adventures and loftiest flights in the Veda and the Upanishads, thereby pointing to the close filiations between ancient Greek and Hindu thought.

Sri Aurobindo rightly maintains that Heraclitus was much more than a clever maker of aphorisms or enigmatic epigrams; in his own right he was a mystic as well, though of the Apollonian and not of the Dionysian kind:

And though no partaker in or supporter of any kind of rites or mummery, Heraclitus still strikes one as at least an intellectual child of the Mystics

and of mysticism, although perhaps a rebel son in the house of his mother. He has something of the mystic style, something of the intuitive Apollonian inlook into the secrets of existence.⁶²

This is important, for it makes Heraclitus a seer who spoke from the level of illumination, and not of mere cerebration.

Heraclitus had his moments of illumination when ideas raced in his head, but not caring to reduce them into a formal system, he turned them into knotted or pregnant aphorisms, often couched in a language that is as much of a riddle as the riddle of the universe that he would fain unriddle if he could. He did indeed say, "All is flux, nothing stays still" and "You cannot step twice into the same stream, for ever other and other waters are flowing in upon you"; but he also said, "It is wise to admit that all things are one" and "Out of all the One, and out of One all".⁶³ In his attempt to reconcile the many and the one, time and eternity and being and becoming, like the Indian Rishis of old Heraclitus too preferred to view Reality as somehow including the divers opposites. "By his conception of existence as at once one and many", says Sri Aurobindo, "he is bound to accept these two aspects of his ever-living Fire as simultaneously true, true in each other; Being is an eternal becoming and yet the Becoming resolves itself into eternal being".⁶⁴ There is the truth of the cosmos ("all things are one"), and there is the cosmic process ("Out of all the One, and

⁶² *Heraclitus* (1968 edition), p. 4.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 5: "It is enigmatic in the style of the mystics, enigmatic in the manner of their thought which sought to express the riddle of existence in the very language of the riddle."

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 13.

out of One all"); but did Heraclitus have a vision of *pralaya* too when he said "Fire will come on all things and judge and convict them"? If he had, that would be another Heraclitean parallelism to Hindu thought, here the "periodic *pralaya*, the Puranic conflagration of the world by the appearance of the twelve suns, the Vedantic theory of the eternal cycles of manifestation and withdrawal from manifestation".⁶⁵

Of particular interest to Sri Aurobindo are these two apopthegms:

But although the Word (Logos) is common to all, the majority of people live as though they had each an understanding peculiarly their own.

The road up and down is one and the same.

These two aphorisms, by a curious coincidence, serve also as epigraphs to T. S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, published twenty years later. Like Sri Aurobindo and Eliot, Heraclitus too had wrestled with seeming opposites only to forge a firm reconciliation at last. Commenting on the first of the above, Sri Aurobindo writes:

...day and night, good and evil are one, because they are the One in their essence, and in the One the distinctions we make between them disappear. There is a Word, a Reason in all things, a Logos, and that Reason is one; only men by the relativity of their mentality turn it each into his personal thought and way of looking at things and live according to this variable relativity. It follows that there is an absolute, a divine way of looking at things: "To God all things are good and just, but men hold some things to be good, others unjust". There is then an absolute good, an absolute beauty,

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 33.

an absolute justice of which all things are the relative expression.⁶⁶

Heraclitus clearly countenanced relative standards, but all derived from one immaculate divine standard: "Fed are all human laws by one, the divine".

If the first aphorism is amenable to being linked with our *ekam sat, viprā bahudhā vadanti* ("One Existent the sages call by various names"), the second connects with the Aurobindonian theory of Involution-Evolution:

Out of Fire, the radiant and energetic principle, air, water and earth proceed, — that is the procession of energy on its downward road; there is equally in the very tension of this process a force of potential return which would lead things backward to their source in the reverse order. In the balance of these two upward and downward forces resides the whole cosmic action; everything is a poise of contrary energies.⁶⁷

Heraclitus thought of Fire as the source of all, Fire being Force as well as Intelligence; and Fire was for him also Zeus the Eternal. But beyond Force and Intelligence — universal energy and universal reason — there is the third principle, "a third aspect of the Self and of Brahman; besides the universal consciousness active in divine knowledge, besides the universal force active in divine will, it saw the universal delight active in divine love and joy".⁶⁸ But this third constituent of the ultimate triune Reality seems to have escaped the Greek thinker, as it has escaped many other Western thinkers and philosophers. Yet, perhaps, Heraclitus' most profound saying — "The kingdom is of the child" — "touches, almost reaches the heart of the secret. For this kingdom

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 51. ⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 34. ⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 71.

is evidently spiritual, it is the crown, the mastery to which the perfect man arrives; and the perfect man is a divine child".⁶⁹ As Eliot flashes forth the revelation —

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight

Even while the dust moves

There rises the hidden laughter

Of children in the foliage

Quick now, here, now, always....⁷⁰

And did Heraclitus experience something even of this, a ripple of the divine *ānanda*? Perhaps; "the Paramahansa, the liberated man, is in his soul *bālavat*, even as if a child"; and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.⁷¹

VI

While the rich content and the revolutionary message of the *Arya* has been already discussed in the earlier sections and chapters, it may be appropriate to say a word or two here about Sri Aurobindo's prose style, — more particularly about the *Arya* style. He was forty-two when the first issue of the journal came out on 15 August 1914, and already he was a master of many languages — classical and modern, Western and Indian — and of diverse realms of knowledge as well. Primarily a poet, he had turned his hand to brilliant journalism at Calcutta and found it equally easy to cultivate verse or "the other harmony of prose". If one takes a total view, his prose writing covers a period of almost sixty years of ceaseless literary activity. The "New Lamps for Old" and Bankim Chandra articles in the *Indu Prakash* in the early eighteen-nineties; the edito-

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 73. ⁷⁰ *Burnt Norton*, ll. 170-4. ⁷¹ *Heraclitus*, p. 74.

rial and other contributions to the *Bande Mataram*, the *Karmayogin* and the *Arya*: the letters — thousands of them — to the disciples: one who views all this variegated opulence of writing can have little doubt that one is confronting a born lord of language, for Sri Aurobindo scatters words about (or so it seems), at once with precision and liberality; he is both voluble in appearance and compact in effect; and his writing, with its effortless ease, has the native force of Nature itself. There is not, of course, one 'style' but many 'styles', each with its sufficiency and appropriateness. Samuel Butler once said that he never knew a writer who took the smallest pains about his 'style' and was at the same time readable. Neither did Sri Aurobindo take "pains" about his prose. Nevertheless, it would not be far from the truth to say that Sri Aurobindo's most characteristic means of self-revelation is a polyphonic style that recalls English masters of the ornate like Burton and Browne and Lamb and Landor at different times, but is in fact *sui generis*, a style which Arjava (J. A. Chadwick) named "global", descriptive of the range of thought as well as the manner of communication.⁷² And, indeed, the *Arya* style — the style of *The Life Divine*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and the other massively weighted and strikingly illuminating sequences — is truly "global" in its oceanic sweeps and vast heavens of comprehension.

In his *Arya* writings, Sri Aurobindo was a teacher and prophet — or nothing. It was the authority gained

⁷² Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1947 to a disciple: "I heard it ('global') first from Arjava who described the language of *Arya* as expressing a global thinking, and I at once caught it up as the right and only word for certain things, for instance, the thinking in masses which is a frequent characteristic of the Overmind" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 333-4).

by his experience that weighted his writing with rich content and it was the force of his personality that gave a glow and urgency to his mode of utterance. Madame Gabriel Mistral has correctly noted that Sri Aurobindo's writing presents "the rare phenomenon of an exposition clear as a beautiful diamond without the danger of confounding the layman", and she further adds:

Six foreign languages have given the Master of Pondicherry a gift of coordination, a clarity free from gaudiness, and a charm that borders on the magical.... We have before us a prose which approximates to that of the great Eckhart, German classicist and fountain-head of European mysticism. ...These are indeed 'glad tidings' that come to us: to know that there is a place in the world where culture has reached its tone of dignity by uniting in one man a supernatural life with a consummate literary style, thus making use of his beautifully austere and classical prose to serve as the handmaid of the spirit.⁷³

Another 'foreigner', Raymond F. Piper, has spoken with equal enthusiasm about the quality of Sri Aurobindo's philosophic thought and prose style:

I could pick a thousand sentences from his writings and say of any one of them: trace its implications, and you will be led into the deep wonderlands of philosophic wisdom. I have never read an author who can compact so much of truth into one sentence as this master.⁷⁴

⁷³ Quoted in Dilip's *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me* (Jaico), p. 107.

⁷⁴ Message to Sri Aurobindo birthday meeting in New York on 15 August 1949. See also Ninian Smart on Sri Aurobindo's style (*The Integral Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*, edited by Spiegelberg and Chaudhuri, 1960, p. 167).

Structurally, any piece of writing by Sri Aurobindo — a letter, a newspaper article, a treatise — would be found, on close analysis, to have adequacy of content as well as concord of parts: no faltering at the exordium, no thinness in the argument or the hard central block, no weakness in the peroration. The bigger sequences, of course, have their visible amplitude and force of style, but even a 'trifle' — one of a score of letters written in the course of a night — has its form and finish too, nothing laboured, nothing for effect, but marked by its distinctive flavour and grace and its spontaneous tightness of form. Sri Aurobindo wouldn't agree that writing letters was a waste of time. As he once explained to Dilip:

Each activity is important in its own place; an electron or a molecule or grain may be small things in themselves, but in their place they are indispensable to the building up of a world, it cannot be made only of mountains and sunsets and streamings of the aurora borealis — though these have their place there. All depends on the force behind these things and the purpose in their action....

Even a casual piece of prose composition carries the force of the spirit, and is charged with serious intent; and 'style' is but a function of this source of origin and the power of the intention. Although his prose writings (which may account for twenty-five large volumes in the Centenary Edition now in progress) were mostly done under the exigencies of journalistic hurry or with a continual race against time, cumulatively and in their total effect the canon can successfully claim for Sri Aurobindo a place among the supreme masters of English prose.

Of the major works, only *The Life Divine* was fully revised, amplified and reorganised before publication in book form, and naturally it has a rounded structure and an incandescent finish that some of the other prose sequences lack.⁷⁵ But even these others — *Essays on the Gita*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and the rest — do not lack the sense of organic growth in argument or final fullness of form. Many readers who make their first contact with Sri Aurobindo by trying to read at a stretch a work like *The Life Divine* feel enchanted no doubt by the opening pages or chapters, but presently feel somewhat put out by the higher and ever higher ocean-waves of thought and the matching roll of majestic articulation. Sri Aurobindo himself did not intend his book to be treated as 'light reading' to be gulped down with ease without the slightest ruffling of the cognitive faculty. *The Life Divine* was, in fact, vision and experience rendered into inspired language, and without some rapport with such a world of intensities and radiances all cavalier attempts at mere "understanding" must fail to come through.⁷⁶ And yet, on closer scrutiny, even the massed paragraphs and seemingly endless sentences would be seen to be fully organised, with carefully wrought interior stitching and the needful soldering of the joints. Here is a random sample:

⁷⁵ In the *Advent* of April 1951, N. Pearson has tried to show how well the 28 chapters of the first Volume of *The Life Divine* have been organised: four chapters each to the three principles—Spirit, Soul, Divine Nature—of the Higher Nature, then four chapters to Supermind, followed by four chapters each to the three principles—Mind, Life, Matter—of the Lower Nature. Pearson further sees this internal organisation "symbolised in the ancient occult sign of the pentacle (or double triangle) enclosing a central square," which was also Sri Aurobindo's symbol.

⁷⁶ Cf. Dr. R. Vaidyanathaswami: "...the reasoning and exposition in

Infinite being loses itself in the appearance of non-being and emerges in the appearance of a finite Soul;

infinite consciousness loses itself in the appearance of a vast indeterminate inconscience and emerges in the appearance of a superficial limited consciousness;

infinite self-sustaining force loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of atoms and emerges in the appearance of the insecure balance of a world;

infinite Delight loses itself in the appearance of an insensible Matter and emerges in the appearance of a discordant rhythm of varied pain, pleasure and neutral feeling, love, hatred and indifference;

infinite unity loses itself in the appearance of a chaos of multiplicity and emerges in a discord of forces and beings which seek to recover unity by possessing, dissolving and devouring each other.⁷⁷

The mere breakdown of the clauses and key-words can sometimes highlight the perfect structuring of the sentence, however unwieldy it may appear when merely massed together on the printed page. A timid writer might have attempted elegant variation in the wrong places and refrained from repeating the clauses "loses itself in the appearance" and "emerges in the appearance" no less than five times in the course of a single sentence. But Sri Aurobindo had courage enough, not only to call a spade a spade, but to call it five times a spade; and the repetitions, in the result, sound almost like refrains

the book are not of the 'dialectical' kind proper to the divided mentality, but are of the same nature as, and cannot be separated from, direct vision" (Review of *The Life Divine*, in the *Indian Express*, 15 August 1940).

⁷⁷ *The Life Divine*, pp. 131-2.

contributing to the rich orchestration of the whole passage.⁷⁸

There is another sentence — in the chapter on 'The Ascent towards Supermind' — which brilliantly and figuratively describes both the direction and the ever-accelerating pace of the adventure of Evolution upon the earth:

The first obscure material movement of the evolutionary Force is marked by an aeonic graduality;

the movement of life-progress proceeds slowly but still with a quicker step, it is concentrated into the figure of millenniums;

mind can still further compress the tardy leisureliness of Time and make long paces of the centuries;

but when the conscious spirit intervenes, a supremely concentrated pace of evolutionary swiftness becomes possible.

Matter-Life-Mind-Supermind (or Truth-Consciousness): such is the swing upwards, faster and faster, dizzier and dizzier, and only the power of the spirit can prevent a slip, a derailment, a forced landing or disintegration! Numerous are such passages in Sri Aurobindo's prose writings, and their steady ascent in thought, the vigour of their phrasing, and their total build of reasoning and revelation make them worth careful and reverent study.

Not infrequently, however, Sri Aurobindo's prose art emits flashes of poetry which illumine and transfigure whole sentences and paragraphs. Simile and metaphor trespass upon the domain of cogent prose and language crystallises into glittering images like these:

⁷⁸ In my book *A Big Change* (1970), a key sentence from the chapter on 'The Evolution of the Spiritual Man' is analysed on pp. 125ff. See also pp. 77ff. and 87ff. for other sentences similarly analysed.

We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.

It has enormous burning eyes; it has mouths that gape to devour, terrible with many tusks of destruction; it has faces like the fires of Death and Time.

She labours to fill every rift with ore, occupy every inch with plenty.

Knowledge waits seated beyond mind and intellectual reasoning throned in the luminous vast of illimitable self-vision.

The sword has a joy in the battle-play, the arrow has a mirth in its hiss and its leaping, the earth has a rapture in its dizzy whirl through space, the sun has the royal ecstasy of its blazing splendours and its eternal motion. O thou self-conscious instrument, take thou too the delight of thy own appointed workings.⁷⁹

In such utterances — their number is legion — dialectical skill gives place to direct vision, the knife-edge clarity and sharpness of prose dissolve into poetic imagery and symbolism, and Sri Aurobindo is seen to be poet no less than the wielder of an animated and effective English prose style.

Some of Sri Aurobindo's characteristically epigrammatic or aphoristic molecules of prose are included in *Thoughts and Glimpses* and *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, and are also scattered in the letters and the "minor" works. One is occasionally overwhelmed by a whole shower as in —

⁷⁹ The first two are from *Essays on the Gita*, the third from *The Renaissance in India*, the fourth from *The Life Divine*, and the last from *The Superman*.

Be wide in me, O Varuna; be mighty in me, O Indra; O Sun, be very bright and luminous; O Moon, be full of charm and sweetness. Be fierce and terrible, O Rudra; be impetuous and swift, O Maruts; be strong and bold, O Aryama; be voluptuous and pleasurable, O Bhaga; be tender and kind and loving and passionate, O Mitra. Be bright and revealing, O Dawn; O Night, be solemn and pregnant. O life, be full, ready and buoyant; O Death, lead my steps from mansion to mansion. Harmonise all these, O Brahmanaspati. Let me not be subject to these gods, O Kali.⁸⁰

Haven't we here the very quintessence of the *Veda*? Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo's imagination and intellectual brilliance fuse into gem-like images, flashing on every side, and also illuminating the inner countries of mind, heart and soul:

Love is the key-note, Joy is the music, Power is the strain, Knowledge is the performer, the infinite All is the composer and audience. We know only the preliminary discords which are as fierce as the harmony shall be great; but we shall arrive surely at the fugue of the divine Beatitudes.

God and Nature are like a boy and girl at play and in love. They hide and run from each other when glimpsed so that they may be sought after and chased and captured.

What is God, after all? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden.

They say that the Gospels are forgeries and Krishna a creation of the poets. Thank God then for the forgeries and bow down before the inventors.

⁸⁰ *Thoughts and Aphorisms* (1958), p. 10.

Great saints have performed miracles; greater saints have railed at them; the greatest have both railed at them and performed them.

Fling not thy alms abroad everywhere in an ostentation of charity; understand and love where thou helpest. Let thy soul grow within thee.

My lover took away my robe of sin and I let it fall, rejoicing; then he plucked at my robe of virtue, but I was ashamed and alarmed and prevented him. It was not till he wrested it from me by force that I saw how my soul had been hidden from me.⁸¹

Wisdom without tears, Truth garbed in the colours of the rainbow, catharsis effected with a smile! "A God who cannot smile", says Sri Aurobindo, "could not have created this humorous universe". Neither could a Prophet who cannot smile have structured *The Life Divine* while yet suffering the citizenship of the life mundane, the life purgatorial and the life infernal. The author of *The Life Divine* was not the forbidding metaphysician many took him to be; he was a humanist and poet before ever he dreamt of Yoga, and he remained a humanist and poet till the last.

⁸¹ The first three extracts are from *Thoughts and Glimpses* and the remaining from *Thoughts and Aphorisms*.

PART IV

ARCHITECT OF THE LIFE DIVINE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LIGHTHOUSE

I

The *Arya* continued to appear month after month throughout the period of the first world war, and discontinued publication only in 1921. The comprehensive Supramental Manifesto for the future — comprising the plea for change, the programme of spiritual evolution (or revolution) and the promise of individual, social and terrestrial transformation, involving man and collective man and global humanity — the grand Manifesto had been broadcast in all its sovereign amplitude and self-sufficiency. While this testament of the Life Divine was unfolding with a leisurely puissance of self-assurance, sending out rays of new understanding and opening up the human consciousness to truths and possibilities till then unsuspected, the outside world went its weary, dreary, unprofitable, even sanguinary way — on the national as well as world theatre of action. After the *tandav*-dance of the wrath of Rudra that had devastated many countries, the armistice had brought an uneasy hush, followed soon by the bickerings of the Peace Conference, the devilish flourish of the weapons of blockade and reparations, the brandishing of words like “war guilt” and “self-determination”, and the culminating mockery of the League of Nations. In India, the first faint hopes of self-government had been blasted by the statutory hypocrisy of “dyarchy” in the Provinces and leonine bureaucracy at the Centre, provoking a new tidal wave of national resentment recalling the days of the

Bande Mataram agitation. It was the beginning of the Gandhi Age — what C. R. Reddy called the modern Heroic Age — in Indian politics.

Gandhiji had already tested the instruments of passive resistance and *satyāgraha* during the struggles against the racist regime in South Africa that would not permit the Indian community of traders and labourers to live in self-respect in their adopted land. After his return to India, he had been slowly but inevitably drawn into the vortex of the national movement. It was as though a more than human power and more than human management had arranged the singular sequence of events: Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal to Pondicherry in 1910, Gandhiji's coming to India in 1914, the return of Tilak from Mandalay, the launching of the Home Rule Movement by Besant and Tilak, the "great shadow" of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, the rising new tempo of repression and the Mahatma's unruffled defiance of the bureaucracy! It now became his openly avowed object to preach disaffection against the "satanic" Government and to organise non-violent opposition to it. The bureaucracy had sown the wind, — and how long could they stave off the whirlwind?

There was a feeling in Nationalist circles that somehow Sri Aurobindo should be persuaded to return to active politics. At Tilak's instance, his colleague Joseph Baptista therefore wrote in December 1919 requesting Sri Aurobindo to accept the editorship of a paper that was to be the organ of the Social Democratic Party of Bombay. Like the *Bande Mataram* thirteen years earlier, this new paper was to give Sri Aurobindo an opportunity to spread the message of patriotism and educate the nation in the tasks of political debate and action. In his

long reply of 5 January 1920, Sri Aurobindo set forth the reasons that weighed with him when he felt compelled to reject the "tempting offer". Two reasons are given in the letter. First, the Government was unlikely to leave him free but would almost certainly intern or imprison him "under one or other of the beneficent Acts which are apparently still to subsist as helps in ushering in the new era of trust and co-operation".¹ That wasn't going to help the Party, — only the work he had in hand would suffer. Secondly, even if he were assured of "an entirely free action and movement", even then he felt he shouldn't leave his retreat just then:

I came to Pondicherry in order to have freedom and tranquillity for a fixed object having nothing to do with present politics — in which I have taken no direct part since my coming here, though what I could do for the country in my own way I have constantly done, — and until it is accomplished, it is not possible for me to resume any kind of public activity.... I must be internally armed and equipped for my work before I leave it (Pondicherry).

The answer indeed was No, but Sri Aurobindo was anxious not to create the impression that he was feeling superior to the claims of the world or even the prudential considerations of the normal human mentality. His idea of spirituality had nothing to do with asceticism or a high disdain for secular things; he would, in fact, include *all* human activity — and therefore politics too — in a complete spiritual life. From 1903 to 1910, he had actively involved himself in politics "with one aim and one alone, to get into the mind of the people a settled

¹ The letter is printed in Purani's *Life of Sri Aurobindo* (1960 edition), pp. 194-6.

will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve it". That aim had largely been achieved already. Moderatism had first been forced into the defensive, and was now no more a force in politics. In the wake of the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwalla atrocity, the Amritsar Congress of December 1919 (under Motilal Nehru's presidentship) had "set the seal" upon Sri Aurobindo's revolutionary ideology of "a settled will for freedom" and his programme of self-help, passive resistance and political and economic boycott as outlined in his "Open Letter" of July 1909. The leadership of the Congress was in tried hands, and Sri Aurobindo thought that if the country maintained its current revolutionary temper (as he had no doubt it would), the "will to freedom" would prevail in the end through appropriate action. Under the circumstances, Sri Aurobindo would prefer to attend to a related but no less important task of immense consequence to India and the world: "What preoccupies me now is the question what it is going to do with its self-determination, how will it use its freedom, on what lines it is going to determine its future?"

Already Sri Aurobindo could see India's freedom as a thing, not only attainable, but as good as attained. Once in 1915, having gone to an occult plane, the Mother had told Sri Aurobindo: "India is free" — not "She will be free" but just "She is free"! It was a thing decreed and inevitable, and only its translation into material terms was in the process of fulfilment.* Sri Aurobindo too had this clear foreknowledge, and he had no desire to take part in the current political action because he knew that in the circumstances then prevailing he wouldn't be able to give that turn to politics which

**Mother India*, June 1970, p. 261.

he thought desirable. As he put it, without mincing matters.

You may ask why not come out and help, myself, so far as I can in giving a lead? But my mind has a habit of running inconveniently ahead of the times, — some might say, out of time altogether into the world of the ideal.... I believe in something which might be called social democracy, but not in any of the forms now current, and I am not altogether in love with the European kind, however great an improvement it may be on the past. I hold that India having a spirit of her own and a governing temperament proper to her own civilisation should, in politics as in everything else, strike out her own original path and not stumble in the wake of Europe.

Sri Aurobindo was thinking, not of a mere change of masters (as we might say, from a 'white' to a 'brown' bureaucracy!), but of transformation in terms of "an uncompromising spiritual idealism of an unconventional kind". But he had still to work out the practical lines of such a comprehensive programme of social and political action, and it wouldn't do to jump into the fray before he was really ready "for either propaganda or action". It was not affectation or spiritual aloofness or want of sympathy with the work Baptista and others were "so admirably doing"; the causes were more fundamental and concerned, in fact, the need for the transvaluation of the principles of Indian and world polity.

In the meantime, his brother Barindra had been released from the Andamans after the armistice, and finding the condition of affairs in Bengal not very promising, he had written to Sri Aurobindo about politics as

well as Yoga. On 7 April 1920, Sri Aurobindo replied in Bengali at some length, and the letter not only carried the political argument of the earlier reply to Baptista a little farther, but opened some new Yogic vistas as well. The two themes of the letter are Yoga and politics, in that order; there is so much intertwining that the two themes become one in the end. Sri Aurobindo had engaged in active politics from 1903 to 1910, and he had commenced Yoga in earnest in 1905; there had been circlings in many directions, there had been realisations, and at Pondicherry he had at last deciphered "the ten limbs of the body" of his integral and supra-mental Yoga and was trying to realise them. And it was only after the complete realisation that he could think of direct political action:

...as long as it is not finished, I doubt if I shall be able to return to Bengal. Pondicherry is the appointed place for my Yoga Siddhi, except indeed one part of it, and that is action. The centre of my work is Bengal, although I hope that its circumference will be all India and the whole earth.²

The fullness of Yogic realisation, first; then, perhaps, political action in Bengal. And yet, although Bengal might be the destined theatre of the experimentation, all India — the great world itself — would share the beneficent results of Sri Aurobindo's action. But the Yoga had to come first, for to build except on strong foundations would be foolish in the extreme. But when would the preliminary work be over? Two years — or twenty — or more? "I am not impatient", he wrote:

I have no impulse to make any unbalanced

² From the English translation published in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*, 1967, p. 123.

haste and rush into the field of work in the strength of the little ego. Even if I did not get success in my work, I would not be shaken. This work is not mine but God's. I will listen to no other call; when God moves me then I will move.³

Again, apart from Sri Aurobindo's readiness to engage in political action, was Bengal ready? Even for revolutionary action of the Western variety, Bengal wasn't quite ready. And Sri Aurobindo didn't want a repetition of that kind of action. He had been nurturing an ideal of an altogether different kind: not a social democracy of the Western type but a *deva saṅgha*, a Community Divine, that would begin somewhere as a pilot project and then spread out and envelop the whole world. It wasn't to be an exclusive or introvert affair:

We do not want to rule out any activity of the world as beyond our province. Politics, industry, society, poetry, literature, art will all remain, but we must give them a new soul and a new form.⁴

The politics of nineteenth and twentieth century India was an importation from Europe, and had proved an imitative exercise leading more and more to frustration. The time had come to go deeper: "We must get to the true soul of India and in its image fashion all works". The consummation to be aimed at was not detestation of the world or minimisation of man, but delight of existence in living every moment of one's life, and maximisation of man to the level of the Divine:

You must have delight in all things — in the Spirit as well as in the body. The body has consciousness, it is God's form.... The flow of that delight precipitates and courses through this body.

³ *ibid.*, p. 124. ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 126.

When you are in such a state, full of spiritual consciousness, you can lead a married life, a life in the world. In all your works you find the expression of God's delight.... No one is a god but in each man there is a god and to make Him manifest is the aim of divine life.⁵

The goal wasn't of course to be reached in a sudden or single leap: Sri Aurobindo had himself faced the perils and difficulties and uncertainties of the journey and the struggle:

The God within takes no account of these hindrances and deficiencies. He breaks his way out. Was the amount of my own failings a small one? Were the obstacles less in my mind and heart and vital being and body? Did it not take time? Has God hammered me less? Day after day, minute after minute, I have been fashioned into I know not whether a god or what. But I have become or am becoming something.... Not our strength but the Shakti of God is the *sādhaka* of this Yoga.⁶

Towards the end of the letter, Sri Aurobindo enters a forceful caveat against the only too common Bengali — or Indian — tendency to skip the discipline of sheer thought-power. Sentiment, excitement, a kind of mistiness that passes for mysticism, the tamasic tendency to take things easy, the desire for results without the necessary sustained effort, the habit of helpless dependence on others — these were the causes of India's decadence; "the life-power had ebbed away". What sort of Siddhi could one hope for when the Sadhana was bereft of Shakti? Love and devotion had to be yoked to knowledge and power for great action to be possible:

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 127. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 127.

Therefore I wish no longer to make emotional excitement or any intoxication of the mind the base. I wish to make a large and strong equanimity the foundation of the Yoga. I want established on that equality a full, firm and undisturbed Shakti in the system and in all its movements. I want the wide display of the light of Knowledge in the ocean of Shakti. And I want in that luminous vastness the tranquil ecstasy of infinite love, delight and oneness. I do not want hundreds of thousands of disciples. It will be enough if I can get a hundred complete men, purified of petty egoism, who will be the instruments of God.⁷

He wasn't himself very anxious to set up as a Guru. What he wanted, and India needed, was a group of men in whom — whether at Sri Aurobindo's touch or at another's — the sleeping godhead had fully awakened and become power-houses of the Life Divine. And Sri Aurobindo concluded this extraordinary letter with this truly extraordinary peroration:

...I too am packing my bag. Still I believe that this bundle is like the net of St. Peter, only crammed with the catch of the Infinite. I am not going to open the bag now. If I do that before the time, all would escape. Neither am I going to Bengal now, not because Bengal is not ready, but because I am not ready. If the unripe goes amidst the unripe, what work can it do?⁸

This is a cross between godly omniscience and brotherly raillery. The humility is sublime, and so is the sense of power and purpose. "The catch of the Infinite"! It was there all right, but he wouldn't open it as yet.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 129. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 130.

During his first ten years' stay in Pondicherry, in the eyes of the world Sri Aurobindo was in seclusion, for he seldom came out of his room, and only a few had ready access to him. He read books and newspapers, he wrote for the *Arya*, he received friends or visitors, but there was an inner life too, and there were the arduous and the adventures of the sadhana; and Thought raced through "spirit immensities" — "past the orange skies of the mystic mind" — to be one with the "vast of God".⁹ There were visitors in the evening, Bharati, V. V. S. Aiyar, Srinivasachariar; there were readings in the Veda; there were the younger men, Nolini, Bejoy, Moni, Va Ra, Saurin, Amrita, who were in attendance whenever necessary; there were occasional visitors, Paul Richard, Madame Alexandra David-Neel, K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, Motilal Roy, Khasirao Jadhav; and there was the all-important visit of Mirra Richard on 29 March 1914. When the *Arya* was launched, thought-power and revealing light were the nectarean merchandise that the monthly paper boat carried to numberless ports during the next six and a half years. Mirra (the Mother of later years) had in the meanwhile left for France in 1915, and after a rewarding sojourn in Japan, she had returned to Pondicherry on 24 April 1920. During his *āśramvās* at Alipur, Sri Aurobindo had broadcast this mystic "Invitation":

I sport with solitude here in my regions,

Of misadventure have made a friend.

Who would live largely? Who would live freely?

Here to the wind-swept uplands ascend?...

Stark must he be and a kinsman to danger

Who shares my kingdom and walks at my side.¹⁰

⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 300. ¹⁰ *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 121.

The Mother's "second coming" was a coming for good; and, besides, she had come with her own "catch of the Infinite"! But the Infinite was the Infinite; *that* was Whole, and *this* was Whole; and the two were really one. In 1914, as Mirra she had recognised in Sri Aurobindo the "well-known being" she had so often encountered in her dreams and visions — the being she had called Krishna. Her second coming six years after only meant that she was utterly convinced that her place and her work was near Sri Aurobindo in India;¹¹ she had come to share his kingdom and walk at his side! At first she stayed at the Magrie Hotel and then at Subbu's Hotel before moving into a rented house, No. 1, Second Line Beach. On 24 November 1920, tempestuous rain caused a lot of seepage and leakage of water in her house, and so Sri Aurobindo advised her to shift forthwith to his own residence, No. 41, Rue François Martin. With her came also an English lady, Miss Hodgson (better known as 'Datta', the name given by Sri Aurobindo), who had long known the Mother and had been living in the other house with her. Hadn't Sri Aurobindo perhaps dimly foreseen the event when he issued the urgent call:

With wind and the weather beating round me

Up to the hill and the moorland I go.

Who will come with me? Who will climb with me?

Henceforth the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were to fare forward together, climbing the same high hill of supramental ascent, and also beckoning countless others to follow them.

¹¹ From an article by the Mother, "How I became conscious of My Mission" (Purani, *Life*, p. 203), originally published in a Chandernagore magazine.

II

In 1920 and after, the developing political situation in India was anything but reassuring. The new Reforms had hardly come up to the expectations of the Nationalists, and they had decided to reject them; and this had led to the surviving Moderates finally seceding from the Congress and forming a Liberal Party of their own. The Jallianwalla massacre in April 1919 had queered the political pitch, and at the Amritsar Congress in December 1919 feelings had run high, and Gandhiji — with the halo of his South African victories and the more recent crown of the Champaran struggle — had suddenly emerged as a formidable power. National resentment against the alien rule had mounted a new dimension, Tagore had returned his Knighthood in immitigable anguish, and in Madras S. Srinivasa Iyengar had resigned his Advocate-Generalship in February 1920. In the early months of 1920, Tilak began to think in terms of “responsible cooperation” (with an inbuilt provision for obstruction and agitation whenever required), while Gandhiji — with Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali — was feeling his way towards a programme of non-violent non-cooperation on the issue of the Punjab atrocities and the Kilafat affront to the Muslim community. Unwilling to let the grass grow under his feet, Gandhiji — with the enthusiastic support of the Ali Brothers — decided to launch his movement on 1 August 1920, although the Congress organisation as such hadn’t yet made up its mind. The sudden death of Tilak on 31 July — on the eve of the inauguration of the movement — left the Nationalists without an effective leader at this crucial time, and their thoughts inevitably turned to Sri Aurobindo.

On being asked to give his reactions to the tragic demise of the Lokamanya, Sri Aurobindo said in the course of his tribute that was published in Bepin Pal's paper, the *Independent*:

A great mind, a great will, a great pre-eminent leader of men has passed away.... He was one who built much rapidly out of little beginnings, a creator of great things out of an unworked material. The creations he left behind him were a new and strong and self-reliant national spirit, the reawakened political mind and life of a people, a will to freedom and action, a great national purpose.... How was India to complete the Lokamanya's work and continue his mission? "Two things India demands", said Sri Aurobindo; "a farther future, the freedom of soul, life and action needed for the work she has to do for mankind; and the understanding by her children of that work and of her own true spirit". India had not only to win the battle of self-determination in the political sense; she had also to recover her true spirit, and in its light alone build her future national existence.

These ideas — here as it were casually thrown in — found fuller expression in an editorial article "Ourselves" which Sri Aurobindo contributed to the *Standard-Bearer*, a new weekly journal launched at Chandernagore by Motilal Roy, the first issue appearing on 15 August 1920. The paper had come into the field, Sri Aurobindo said, with a special mission, which was to endeavour to effect ultimately a great and high change in "the future of the race and the future of India". The time had come indeed for a close alliance between the West's mastery of science and machinery and India's clue to spiritual mastery, and out of this alliance alone could emerge the

desired union of life and the spirit:

An outer activity as well as an inner change is needed and it must be at once a spiritual, cultural, educational, social and economic action. Its scope, too, will be at once individual and communal, regional and national, and eventually a work not only for the nation but for the whole human people. The immediate action of this will be a new creation, a spiritual education and culture, an enlarged social spirit founded not on division but on unity... not on any Western model but on the communal principle native to India.

Here in a few phrases Sri Aurobindo would seem to have prophetically outlined the genesis and whole direction of development of the Yogashram at Pondicherry. But the call went forth particularly to the young — the young in years and the young in spirit — for only they would be able to bear the impact of the new Light and bring to fruition the stupendous programme of change and transformation:

It is the young who must be the builders of the new world — not those who accept the competitive individualism, the capitalism or the materialistic communism of the West.... They will need to consecrate their lives to an exceeding of their lower self, to the realisation of God in themselves and in all human beings.... This ideal can be as yet only a little seed and the life that embodies it a small nucleus, but it is our fixed hope that the seed will grow into a great tree and the nucleus be the heart of an ever-extending formation.

With his mind dwelling on the possibility of realising this momentous change in human life, it was hardly sur-

prising that Sri Aurobindo didn't want to be lured back to combative political action in India.

While Gandhiji and his hot-gospellers were canvassing support for the non-cooperation movement, the older Nationalists looked forward to the next regular session of the Congress to be held at Nagpur in December 1920. Sri Aurobindo's friend of former days, Dr. B. S. Moonje of Nagpur, made a direct approach to the recluse at Pondicherry. Leaders like Lajpat Rai, G. S. Khaparde, Baptista, C. R. Das, Moonje himself and many others felt that the Gandhian emphasis on the Punjab excesses and the Kilafat question was an indefensible narrowing down of the Nationalist demand, while the religious overtones of the allergy to violence, the curious highlighting of hand-spinning and hand-weaving, and the doubtful efficacy of the triple boycott (of the Councils, the Courts and of the educational institutions) seemed to make the Gandhian programme no more than an exercise in derailing the national movement from its main political course. The special Congress at Calcutta would no doubt take a first look at the problem in September, but the issue would be finally settled only at Nagpur. Hence the importance of the Nagpur Congress Presidentship.

On Sri Aurobindo's part, there was no vacillation whatsoever. After the Mother's second coming, the practical side of his own work — for India and the world — was in a process of formulation. In August, then, he was clearer even than six months earlier when he wrote to Baptista declining the proffered editorship. And so Sri Aurobindo first wired his refusal, and then followed it up with a letter on 31 August 1920.¹² As in the

¹² The letter is published in the *Advent*, August 1967.

earlier letter, here too Sri Aurobindo moves from the more obvious but less important to the more basic but less obvious reasons. It wouldn't be possible for him to sign the Congress creed as it was, and if he became President, his accent on policy and programme was likely to be different from the ruling orthodoxy. "I am entirely in sympathy with all that is being done so far as its object is to secure liberty for India", he wrote, and added; "but I should be unable to identify myself with the programme of any of the parties". In critical times, the President of the Congress had not only to read a ceremonial speech at the annual session; he would also have to lead the Party throughout the year and keep in constant touch with its activities. Sri Aurobindo had no taste for that kind of harness, and perhaps no talent either. Then comes the main reason:

The central reason, however, is that I am no longer first and foremost a politician, but have definitely commenced another kind of work with a spiritual basis, a work of spiritual, social, cultural and economic reconstruction of an almost revolutionary kind.

Finally, a personal explanation. Dr. Moonje and his friends seemed to think that only Sri Aurobindo could fill the void created by Tilak's death, but in this they were surely mistaken. In the first place, Tilak was Tilak, and no one — "myself least of all" — was capable of taking his place. In the second place, Sri Aurobindo hadn't Tilak's "suppleness, skill and determination" to carry out his policy of "responsible cooperation", and he hadn't either the adaptability to toe the Gandhian line. He couldn't put the Tilakite policy into practice, for "nothing could induce me to set my foot in the new Councils". As for

the Gandhian way, Sri Aurobindo would be in even greater difficulties with it:

...a gigantic movement of non-cooperation merely to get some Punjab officials punished or to set up again the Turkish Empire which is dead and gone, shocks my ideas both of proportion and of common sense. I could only understand it as a means of "embarrassing the Government" and seizing hold of immediate grievances in order to launch an acute struggle for autonomy after the manner of Egypt and Ireland, though no doubt without the element of violence.

For the Congress really to hold an attraction to a man like Sri Aurobindo, it should radically change its creed, function, organisation and policy, and this of course wasn't likely to happen. And Sri Aurobindo concluded his letter with the sentiment that the Congress had — and should have — its own collective inspiration and momentum, and the absence or presence of any particular leader should make little difference to its deliberations and decisions.

At the Calcutta special Congress presided over by Lajpat Rai, the resolution on non-cooperation was passed by the delegates, 1886 voting for it and 884 against. If some of the leaders felt that Nagpur would reverse the Calcutta decision, they were doomed to disappointment. C. Vijayaraghavachariar of Salem presided over the session, and made the demand for Swaraj more comprehensive than the mere redress of the Punjab and Kilafat wrongs. But the non-cooperation plank couldn't be successfully assailed, and C.R. Das himself, who came with a huge contingent of delegates from Bengal with the avowed purpose of wrecking non-cooperation, ultimately sup-

ported it instead. The Mahatma carried the day, and the Gandhian Congress heaved forward on the crest of tremendous popular excitement and mass involvement reminiscent of the great days of the Home Rule movement and the earlier *Bande Mataram* agitation. Leaders like M.A. Jinnah, Tej Bahadur Sapru and V.S. Srinivasa Sastri were now out of the Congress, but that meant no serious diminution in its strength, for it had swollen into a mighty flood for the time being and seemed to be possessed of almost irresistible momentum. But presently it was clear that the triple boycott wasn't producing any decisive results. And the Gandhian promise of "Swaraj in one year" seemed to have misfired, after all. Only repression was in full swing, and its provocation was such that "non-violence" couldn't always remain non-violent. Sir Sankaran Nair said, in his *Gandhi and Anarchy*, that "almost every item in his (Gandhi's) programme has been tried and found useless to attain Home Rule". Even the plank of Hindu-Muslim unity suffered serious cracks after the Moplah rebellion in Malabar, and communal strife began to erupt, now here now there, with dangerous frequency. And the word "non-violence" itself acquired a bad taste after the tragic exhibition of mob violence at Chauri Chaura. Gandhiji had at last to acknowledge his "Himalayan miscalculation" and call off his mass civil disobedience movement.

Although Sri Aurobindo had firmly declined to exchange his Cave of Tapasya at Pondicherry for the battle-field of political debate and action in India, he wasn't by any means indifferent to what was happening in Bengal or in India. There were visitors, and there were interviews, and there were discussions and there was also some significant action, as yet nameless, on the

occult planes. Advocate S. Doraiswami Aiyar from Madras, W. W. Pearson from Shantiniketan, Dr. Moonje from Nagpur, Colonel Wedgewood from Britain, and Saraladevi Chaudhurani from Calcutta were among the more important visitors at this time, and the talks must have covered a very wide range. There is a record of the conversation with Saraladevi, which throws light on Sri Aurobindo's views on the programme and prospects of the non-cooperation movement. To the pointed question from Saraladevi, "Is it true you are against the non-cooperation movement?", Sri Aurobindo is reported to have answered: "I am not against it; the train has arrived, it must be allowed to run its own course". The "train" metaphor is then amplified by both with a touch of playful raillery. When Saraladevi asks, "Why don't you come out and try to run your own train?", Sri Aurobindo answers blandly: "I must first prepare the rails and lay them down, then only can I get the train to arrive". Then, more seriously, Sri Aurobindo told Saraladevi:

Uptil now only waves of emotion and a certain all-round awakening have come.... What is needed is more organisation of the national will. It is no use emotional waves rising and spreading, then going down.... What we should do is to organise local committees of action throughout the country to carry out any mandate of the central organisation. These local leaders must stay among the people. Sri Aurobindo also returned to his earlier insistence — going back to the days of his editorship of the *Bande Mataram* — that India should learn to thirst for freedom "because of herself, because of her own spirit", and not merely because freedom would mean the redress of cer-

tain current grievances:

I would very much like India to find her own Swaraj and then, like Ireland, to work out her salvation even with violence — preferably without violence. Our basis must be broader than that of mere opposition to the British Government. All the time our eyes are turned to the British and their actions. We must look to ourselves irrespectively of them, and having found our own nationhood, make it free.¹³

When the non-cooperation movement had exhausted its initial force by 1922, Chittaranjan Das, Motilal Nehru and others wished to give a new orientation to Congress activity. It was about this time that Chittaranjan requested Sri Aurobindo to return to Bengal and take up the leadership of the Congress. Sri Aurobindo's reply (18 November 1922) was again characteristic of him, and was of a piece with the earlier letters to Moonje, Barindra and Baptista:

I think you know my present idea and the attitude towards life and work to which it has brought me. I see more and more manifestly that man can never get out of the futile circle the race is always treading, until he has raised himself on to a new foundation. I have become confined in a perception which I had, always, less clearly and dynamically then, but which has now become more and more evident to me, that the true basis of work and life is the spiritual: that is to say, a new consciousness to be developed only by Yoga. But what precisely was the nature of the dynamic power of this grea-

¹³ *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo, First Series*, recorded by A. B. Purani (1959), pp. 28-30.

ter consciousness? What was the condition of its effective truth? How could it be brought down, mobilised, organised, turned upon life? How could our present instruments—intellect, mind, life, body—be made true and perfect channels for this great transformation? This was the problem I have been trying to work out in my own experience and I have now a sure basis, a wide knowledge and some mastery of the secret.... I have still to remain in retirement. For I am determined not to work in the external field till I have the sure and complete possession of this new power of action—not to build except on a perfect foundation.¹⁴

Das and Motilal went ahead, however, and unmindful of the rebuff at the Gaya Congress (December 1922) where the “no-changers” led by Rajaji (C. Rajagopalachari) had their way, the “rebels” organised the Swarajya Party with a policy and a programme that were a via media between Tilakite “responsible cooperation” and Gandhian non-cooperation. On 5 June 1923, Das visited Pondicherry during his South Indian tour, saw Sri Aurobindo and discussed the new Party’s future course of action. Reminiscing about the meeting fifteen years later, Sri Aurobindo seems to have said:

He (Chittaranjan) was the last of the old group. He came here and wanted to be a disciple. I said he wouldn’t be able to go through in Yoga as long as he was in the political movement. Besides, his health was shattered.¹⁵

¹⁴ Quoted in Dilip Kumar Roy’s *Tirthankar*, p. 354.

¹⁵ *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, recorded by Nirodbaran (1966), p. 48. As recorded by V. Chidanandam (*Mother India*, February 1972, p. 22), Sri Aurobindo seems to have referred to Das in an earlier (1926) conver-

It is clear Sri Aurobindo advised Das to persevere in his political work and also attend to his spiritual life to the extent possible. One agonising question seems to have come up during the discussions: Hindu-Muslim relations in India generally, and in Bengal particularly. Almost twenty-five years later, Sri Aurobindo recalled how Das had told him when he came to Pondicherry that "he (Das) would not like the British to go out until this dangerous problem had been settled".¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo's own view of the matter changed little since he wrote in the *Karmayogin* in 1910:

Hindu-Muhammadan unity cannot be effected by political adjustment or Congress flatteries. It must be sought deeper down, in the heart and in the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought.... We shall do well to remember... that love compels love and that strength conciliates the strong... we must extend the unfaltering love of the patriot to our Mussalman brother, remembering always that in him too Narayan dwells and to him too our Mother has given a permanent place in her bosom; but we must cease to approach him falsely or flatter out of a selfish weakness and cowardice.¹⁷

On his return to Calcutta, Das asked for a message for the daily paper, *Forward*, that he was launching as the organ of the Swaraj Party, but Sri Aurobindo replied on 25 August 1923 that he would prefer not to send such

sation also: "Das asked to come here, but I refused because he would have brought a different world here and because he was not ready. His psychic being would have easily opened. But there was much vital movement in his nature. His intellect was lucid".

¹⁶ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 242.

¹⁷ Reprinted in the *Advent* (April 1968), pp. 19-20.

a message, for he felt that any public support on the physical plane was more likely to interfere with the effectiveness of the silent occult support that he was giving to the cause already. The phenomenal success of the Swaraj Party during the next two years made a deep impression on Lord Birkenhead the India Secretary, who thought highly of Chittaranjan's patriotism as well as statesmanship. A rapprochement between Britain and India seemed imminent, but Chittaranjan's sudden death on 16 June 1925 put an abrupt end to those hopes. It was "a supreme loss", said Sri Aurobindo in his obituary tribute; "consummately endowed with political intelligence, magnetism, personality, force of will, tact of the hour and an uncommon plasticity of mind, he was the one man after Tilak who could have led India to Swaraj". A further attempt was made to get Sri Aurobindo to fill the political vacuum in Bengal created by Chittaranjan's death, but once again Sri Aurobindo firmly declined to be deflected from his own chosen course.

Between 1920 and 1926, it was customary for Sri Aurobindo to grant interviews to select visitors and to meet his close associates or disciples in the evenings. These meetings were held in the veranda in front of his room in the house (now the "Guest House") in Rue François Martin, and after October 1922 in the upstairs veranda of his new house (now the "Library House"), No. 9, Rue de la Marine. When the others (seldom more than a dozen) had gathered, he would come in simple *dhoti*, part of which covering the upper part of his body as well; chaddar or shawl was used but rarely, and only "in deference to the climate". Recapitulating the atmosphere of these meetings, Purani writes as follows:

...there were days when more than three-fourths of the time passed in complete silence... or there was only an abrupt "Yes" or "No" to all attempts at drawing him out in conversation. And even when he participated in the talk, one always felt that his voice was that of one who does not let his whole being flow into his words; there was a reserve and what was left unsaid was perhaps more than what was spoken. What was spoken was what he felt necessary to speak.¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo usually took the mood of the moment and the measure of the man into consideration when he made his comments or gave his replies. Naturally enough, certain subjects — Gandhi, Khaddar, Kilafat, non-violence, non-cooperation, Swarajist stances — cropped up rather frequently during this period, though there was no dearth of other topics either. Once when somebody remarked, "C. Rajagopalachari says one yard of Khaddar means one step towards Swaraj", the answer came readily, "It will be a very long way in that case".¹⁹ Again, on another occasion when someone made the assertion "Khadi is an emblem of purity", Sri Aurobindo deplored the habit of equating Khadi with purity, Swaraj, politics, religion, etc., and asked: "Nobody objects to Khadi being used on its own merits. Why not use it as such? Why put music, religion, Swaraj, etc. into it?"²⁰ After the rise of Kemal Pasha in Turkey and the end of the Kilafat in March 1924, the whole Kilafat agitation in India became in retrospect an exercise in the theatre of the absurd. Clarifying the historical aspect of the

¹⁸ *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, First Series, p. 12.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, Second Series (1961), p. 24.

²⁰ *ibid.*, First Series, pp. 60-1.

question, Sri Aurobindo said:

In the first four Khalifas there was the reality of the Kilafat. They were the centres of Islamic culture and had some spirituality. After that the Umayyad and other dynasties came, and it became more and more religious and external. When it passed into the hands of the Turks, it became a mere political institution....²¹

On the question of non-violence and soul-force, it was usual to cite the Puranic example of Prahlad. The following exchanges reveal both the wisdom and the good humour that Sri Aurobindo brought to these informal talks:

Disciple. He (Gandhi) always calls it soul-force.

Sri Aurobindo. Really speaking, it is a kind of moral force or, if you like, will-force that is ethical in its nature....

Disciple. What about Prahlad? He succeeded because of soul-force.

Sri Aurobindo. I do not know; for that you must ask Prahlad.

Disciple. But the Mahatma says that Prahlad used soul-force and he derives his Satyagraha from him.

Sri Aurobindo. First of all, Prahlad was young. Then, his father was King. There was the natural love for the father — very strong at that time in the society. But you must also remember that the whole thing resulted in tearing out the entrails of his father. (*Laughter*)

Disciple. Sri Krishna and Arjuna can serve as examples of men who resorted to what the Mahatma calls "violence".

²¹ *ibid.*, Second Series, pp. 20-1.

Another Disciple. But the Mahatma says, "I am not Krishna".

Sri Aurobindo. Any man can say. "I am not Prahlad".²²

The interviews, on the other hand, were rather more formal occasions, but we have only a few records of these. A close associate of Andhraratna Gopalakrishnayya, G. V. Subba Rao met Sri Aurobindo in October 1923, and recalling the meeting many years later he said:

Sri Aurobindo was dazzling bright in colour — it was said that, in his earlier years, he was more dark than brown — and had a long, rather thin beard... with streaks of white strewn here and there. The figure was slender and not much taller than Gandhiji's.... His voice was low, but quite audible, quick and musical.... It seemed as though he could know a man by a sweep of his eyes.²³

On 5 January, Lala Lajpat Rai, Purushottamdas Tandon and some others met Sri Aurobindo. First Lalaji and Sri Aurobindo conversed privately for about forty-five minutes, then they joined the others. The talk turned presently on the lust for power and the reign of corruption. What was the remedy, then? Sri Aurobindo seems to have remarked:

The lust for power will be always there. You can't get over it by shutting out all positions of power; our workers must get accustomed to it. They must learn to hold the positions for the

²² *ibid.*, pp. 60-1. One thing to be remembered is that Sri Aurobindo didn't see or approve these records of his talks or interviews with him. The words put into his mouth are as the recorder remembers them to have been said. This limitation has to be steadily kept in mind by the reader.

²³ *Sunday Times*, 6 May 1951.

nation. This difficulty would be infinitely greater when you get Swaraj. These things are there even in Europe.... Only, they have got discipline — which we lack — and a keen sense of national honour which we have not got.²⁴

Just as Gandhiji figured often in the interviews and talks at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo was also often in Gandhiji's thoughts. He knew about Sri Aurobindo's unique contribution to political awakening in India and he too was intrigued by Sri Aurobindo's unwillingness to return to active politics. He toyed with the idea of meeting Sri Aurobindo and talking things over with him, and with this end in view he sent his son, Devadas, to Pondicherry to prepare the ground. When Devadas asked for Sri Aurobindo's views on non-violence, he seems to have posed the counter-question: "Suppose there is an invasion of India by the Afghans, how are you going to meet it with non-violence?" When this was reported to Gandhiji, he had evidently no further desire to meet Sri Aurobindo.²⁵ Still, one cannot but regret that such a unique confrontation never took place.

III

If Sri Aurobindo and his two collaborators had hoped in August 1914 to storm humanity into accepting the gospel of the Life Divine following the lead of the *Arya*, they were indeed asking for disappointment. Owing to the exigencies of the war, the circulation of the *Arya* had been largely confined to India, and the French edition was — for the same reason — short-lived. And even

²⁴ *Evening Talks*, First Series, pp. 64-5. ²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

in India, how many were really willing to impose on themselves the continuous intellectual strain that Sri Aurobindo demanded from them? No doubt, the journal had its receptive (if limited) audience in whom the seminal ideas took root. Especially the young men who read it with avidity thought that the *Arya* really spoke to them, that it tried to deliver a new message to the world, that its supramental manifesto was of immense consequence to humanity's future. They didn't perhaps understand all that the *Arya* said, but what they understood was enough to make them thrill with the intimations of that new revelation and to sense with a wondrous new surmise a great future for man and the world.

The war and the first after-war years in Europe were a period of agonising self-appraisal for sensitive young men and women. And in India too the situation was not very different, though not for quite the same reasons. In externals, the world still seemed a pitiful prey to the forces that were engineering conflict and chaos. Industrial civilisation and urban rattle and strife seemed a danger and a trap to those few who were afflicted with a quick sensibility and a wide-awake conscience. For the intellectuals, for the sophisticated, for the bright young things and the grey elderly wrecks, for the hollow men and the stuffed men and the electronic men, the world had the look of a rat's alley, a waste patch or a giant capsule, and in their struggle for existence men encountered only prickly pear, rattling bones or pursuing shadows. The mood found expression, in the West, in the chilling literature of disillusion — in works like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. And not only the bleached and empty men and women of the

war-weary West, but Indian youths too — recoiling from the death-stare of political, economic and spiritual frustration or writhing under the vulgarity of “civilisation” or maddened by the politics of selfishness and communalism — felt the invasion of cynicism and desperation, and found in Eliot the laureate of their moods and musings:

This is the dead land

This is the cactus land.

Try as they might, the idea would not crystallise into reality but would vaporise instead; there was an icy clutch at the heart, murderous fingers seemed to fly at one's throat, and the currents of life seemed to lose themselves in stretches of desert sand:

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow.²⁶

They raised their voices to God, or whatever gods there be, and feeling a drying-up of the roots of life, they cried like Hopkins, *Send our roots rain!* Some few read the *Arya*, and felt a sudden wrenching turn in their lives. This was the Lighthouse that those lone lost barks on the sea needed. They turned their gaze towards the Light, and late or soon they made for Pondicherry.

Even before the *Arya* had begun its career, young men like Nolini, Bejoy Nag, Saurin and Moni were already with Sri Aurobindo. “With those who accompanied me or joined me at Pondicherry”, writes Sri Aurobindo, “I had at first the relation of friends and

²⁶ *The Hollow Men.*

companions rather than of a Guru and disciples; it was on the ground of politics I had come to know them, and not on the spiritual ground".²⁷ In the early years at Pondicherry, these young men were almost a human curtain between Sri Aurobindo and the outside world. Some of them played football in the evenings, and they learnt the Veda, and the Latin and Greek classics. Others like Va Ra came, stayed for a time, then went away. Amrita came as a boy in 1912, and came for good in 1919. It was Amrita too who first took V. Chandrasekharam an Andhra youth to Sri Aurobindo. After an interview of only five minutes, he became an ardent disciple; and when he came to stay with Sri Aurobindo, he read the Rig Veda with him.

Ambalal B. Purani's coming was from far-away Gujarat, — and thereby hangs a tale. His brother, Chhotalal Purani, had received from Sri Aurobindo in 1907 certain broad directions for revolutionary activity in Gujarat, and Barindra had given the formula for making bombs. As a boy, Ambalal had heard Sri Aurobindo at Baroda in 1908, just after the Surat Congress — "heard him without understanding everything that was spoken".²⁸ In 1914, as a student in college, he had become an advance subscriber to the *Arya*, having seen an advertisement in the *Bombay Chronicle*. By 1916 Ambalal had started corresponding with Sri Aurobindo and translating portions into Gujarati. When the war ended, Purani thought that he should meet Sri Aurobindo first before putting the original plan for revolutionary activity into effect. At last, one afternoon in December

²⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 114.

²⁸ The extracts are from Purani's own account given in his *Life of Sri Aurobindo* (Second Edition: 1960), pp. 288ff.

1918, he went up to meet Sri Aurobindo in his Rue François Martin residence:

Sri Aurobindo was sitting in a wooden chair behind a small table covered with an indigo-blue cloth in the veranda upstairs. I felt a spiritual light surrounding his face. His look was penetrating.... I informed him that our group was now ready to start revolutionary activity. It had taken us about eleven years to organise.

The conversation that followed seemed at first to be at cross-purposes. While Purani wanted the "go ahead!" signal for revolutionary activity, Sri Aurobindo wanted Purani to take to a spiritual life. Surely, *not* so long as India had not shaken off subjection? Sri Aurobindo gently pointed out that politics was necessary, and Yoga was necessary; many were called to politics, but few to Yoga — and these chosen few should not reject the call. Purani was of course free to pursue the path of revolution, but Sri Aurobindo couldn't give his consent to it. Then followed these interchanges:

Purani. But it was you who gave us the inspiration and the start for revolutionary activity. Why do you now refuse to give your consent to its execution?

Sri Aurobindo. Because I have done the work and I know its difficulties. Young men come forward to join the movement being inspired by idealism and enthusiasm. But these elements do not last long. It becomes very difficult to observe and exact discipline. Small groups begin to form within the organisation, rivalries grow between groups and even between individuals.... The agents of the Government generally manage to

join these organisations from the very beginning. And so they are unable to act effectively. Sometimes they sink so low as to quarrel even for money....

Purani wasn't still convinced: how could he concentrate on Sadhana when his mind would be unescapably pre-occupied with the issue of India's freedom? This was an impasse — almost an impasse:

Sri Aurobindo remained silent for two or three minutes. It was a long pause. Then he said: "Suppose an assurance is given to you that India will be free?"

"Who can give such an assurance?" I could feel the echo of doubt and challenge in my own question.

Again he remained silent for three or four minutes. Then he looked at me and added: "Suppose I give you the assurance?"

I paused for half-a-minute — considered the question within myself and said: "If you give the assurance, I can accept it".

"Then, I give you the assurance that India will be free", he said in a serious tone.

At the time of taking leave of him again, Sri Aurobindo repeated the assurance: "You can take it from me, it is as certain as the rising of the sun tomorrow. The decree has already gone forth, it may not be long in coming". And so Purani found that his personal question and the problem for his revolutionary group had both been decisively solved. His work was over, and he returned to Gujarat — but only to come again in 1921. This time Purani noticed (as others had) the change in Sri Aurobindo's complexion: for it was no more that of the

average Bengali — rather dark — though with a lustre on the face and the penetrating gaze. Now the “whole body glowed with a soft creamy white light”. He saw the Mother too, and like the Master, even his house seemed to have undergone a transformation:

There was a clean garden in the open courtyard, every room had simple but decent furniture — a mat, a chair and a small table. There was an air of neatness and order. This was, no doubt, the effect of the Mother’s presence.

After a stay of eleven days, Purani went away, and then returned early in 1923 to stay with Sri Aurobindo permanently.

Sri Aurobindo’s younger brother, Barindra, who had given the formula for bomb-making to Chhotalal Purani, came to stay with his brother in 1920, having first (as we saw) corresponded with him about politics and Yoga. Ullaskar Datta, another revolutionary and close associate of Barin, also came towards the close of 1920. After the years in the Andamans, he wasn’t now quite the same man who had once turned his home into a laboratory for making bombs, the man who had led the chorus when the Alipur prisoners were taken in the jail van to the Court. But the head was broken, but unbowed! Another actor of the early days, Abinash Bhattacharya, who had kept house for Sri Aurobindo and had also been a revolutionary, was in Pondicherry for a while. Yet another associate of the political period, Amarendra of Uttarpara, who used to be known as “Gabriel” to the revolutionary group, now appeared in Pondicherry as Swami Kevalananda complete with matted hair as head of a group of Sadhus! Many came and went like sea-waves, but a few remained with Sri Aurobindo. Cham-

paklal, for example, first came in 1921 as a young man of eighteen, went back to Gujarat, and returned in 1923 to stay with Sri Aurobindo till the end, the most steadfast and tender-hearted of his disciples.

And now, early in 1924, an unusual visitor to Pondicherry: Dilip Kumar Roy, son of Dwijendralal Roy the Bengali dramatist. A contemporary of Subhas Chandra Bose in college, like him Dilip too thought of Sri Aurobindo as a legendary figure almost, of whom people talked in whispers of rapturous excitement and enthusiasm. With his rich academic and cultural background, with influential friends the world over, and having already made his mark in music and trailing clouds of glorious promise in other fields, Dilip nevertheless felt a gnawing discomfort in his heart and so made a trip to Pondicherry and saw Sri Aurobindo on 24 January 1924. "Even before I met you for the first time", Sri Aurobindo was to confide to Dilip later, "I knew of you and felt at once the contact of one with whom I had that relation which declares itself constantly through many lives". Dilip was, for the time being at any rate, overwhelmed by that "radiant personality", and felt drawn and lost within the orbit of a great immaculate peace. But he had also to admit the justice of Sri Aurobindo's dismissal: "Yours is still a mental seeking; for my Yoga something more is needed".²⁹ On the other hand, wherever he might go, whatever he might do, the worm of unease still stirred within, and there was no settled peace or even hope of it. He needed a Guru, and Sri Aurobindo hadn't accepted him! It was under very different circumstances and in a far-off village that sudden light was thrown upon his predicament. He had

²⁹ Purani, *Life*, p. 308.

a sitting with a Yogi with occult powers, who asked Dilip at last: "But why are you hunting for a Guru, now that Sri Aurobindo himself has accepted you?" And, after some more explanation, he added:

You have been called, but remember it is even more difficult to be chosen. For that you will have to surrender your will utterly to your Guru so that he may mould you as he will....³⁰

Perhaps there were hesitations still. He no doubt wished to burn his boats and take a leap towards that other shore — yet something held him back, he wasn't quite sure he would safely come through! When he spoke about this tussle within, a friend who saw where the trouble lay said bluntly: "You are *bargaining* with the Divine! *Quid pro quo?* This is not the spirit which has moved those who staked their all in the past for the All-in-all!"³¹ That was the needed "break", the shock of transcendence. He spent a sleepless night, and then he prayed again as he hadn't prayed before; and, suddenly, "something happened... this time it was *he* who came to me". Without further avoidable delay, he rushed to Pondicherry and arrived there towards the end of November 1928, this time to stay there and do the sadhana of Sri Aurobindo's integral Yoga.

There was, then, Philip Barbier de St. Hilaire, a young Frenchman of high intelligence and ardent aspiration, who first came from Japan to Pondicherry on 26 December 1925. Having accepted him as a disciple, Sri Aurobindo gave him a new name, 'Pavitra'. They had spiritual talks spread over several months in 1926, and the record of these talks makes enlightening reading. On

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 310.

³¹ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me* (Jaico Edition), p. 22.

one occasion (8 March), on Pavitra remarking "It would seem easier to overcome the causes of agitation by retiring from the world", Sri Aurobindo answered that it would be "altogether futile" to make that kind of withdrawal, and added: "If we, here, retire a little from human contact, it is not for the same reason, but mainly in order to avoid the shock and pressure of the thoughts of others directed towards us".³² Then Pavitra asked whether what was happening to him was "the second birth", and Sri Aurobindo answered serenely, "Yes — but in this Yoga one must pass through many new births". On another occasion (10 May), Pavitra asked whether his giving up the desire for a union between science and occultism was right and whether he could return to it again. Sri Aurobindo was categorical in his reply:

Indeed, in Yoga, one must give up everything, all ideals, even as all desires. A moment comes when what is true in the being, what is not mental but deeper, and which must be used by the Divine, — the moment comes when this is awakened. This happens when the force descends into the physical plane. What was mental or vital is rejected, but the true forms of action continue.³³

But hesitations, setbacks, uncertainties alternated with reviving hopes, forced marches and relaxations. There were disturbing extraneous influences, and there was the Guru's force counteracting them. Then, on 14 June, a crucial conversation:

Pavitra. I suppose there is no need to feel dis-

³² *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, February 1970, p. 33.

³³ *ibid.*, April 1970, p. 41.

couraged. I am not at all discouraged, or even sad, about this process taking so long a time.

Sri Aurobindo. No need at all.

Pavitra. When I came here you saw in me certain possibilities and also certain difficulties. Now is there any change in the outlook?

Sri Aurobindo. No.

Pavitra. I mean: do you think it will be possible for me to stay here?

Sri Aurobindo. Yes, certainly. I have the conviction you will stay here.³⁴

Pavitra remained, the bud of his spiritual aspiration opened out gradually into a full efflorescence, and he became one of the most authentic *sādhaks* of the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Others came too — some remained, some went away — and some went away and returned to stay permanently. By 1926, there were about twenty-five *sādhaks* staying with Sri Aurobindo. Some from Bengal, Nolini, Barindra, Bejoy, Moni, Upendra; some from Gujarat, Purani, Champaklal, and the Punamchands; some from the South, Amrita, Chandrasekharam, Kothandaraman, Raṅgam; and there were also the *sadhaks* from beyond the shores of India, Datta (Miss Hodgson) and Pavitra. "To the Lighthouse!" had been the cry of these distracted mariners on life's uncharted sea; and arrived at the haven at last, they were well content.

IV

We saw that Mirra the Mother, whose second coming took place on 24 April 1920, had to move to Sri

³⁴ *ibid.*, November 1970, pp. 30, 32.

Aurobindo's house seven months later on the night of terrible storm and rain (24 November). On his second visit, Purani found that Sri Aurobindo's house had undergone a visible change for the better and attributed it rightly to the Mother's presence. There developed also an atmosphere of tension for more than one reason. In the first place, during the winter of 1921, a dismissed cook by name Vattal sought the help of a magician-fakir who used a boy servant in Sri Aurobindo's house as medium and caused stones to fall promiscuously, and even inside closed rooms. A police constable who came to investigate was himself hit by one of the mysterious stones, and fled in panic. Presently the missiles began to hit the boy servant and make him bleed. The Mother with her occult knowledge concluded that there was a nexus between the boy and the happenings, and so he was sent away to another house; and the stone-throwing ceased at once. But the sequel was that the evil force, being thus thrown back, hit the ex-cook Vattal who fell seriously ill. His hapless wife appealed to Sri Aurobindo, who generously forgave the man, and he soon recovered.³⁵

In the second place, differences arose between the Pravartak Sangha of Chandernagore that was being run by Motilal Roy and the spiritual centre at Pondicherry. It was, of course, Sri Aurobindo himself who had first given the idea to Motilal Roy — it was evidently intended to be a sort of controlled experiment. But Motilal "took it up with all his vital being and in an egoistic way", with the result that the lower vital forces took possession of the work and gave it a direction that was far from satisfactory. The Chandernagore group made "Commune,

³⁵ Purani, *Life*, pp. 208; 315-7.

Culture and Commerce" the watchwords of the Pravartak Sangha, and after the severance of connection in 1922, the Sangha developed in its own way, with no doubt some residual Aurobindonian inspiration still, but mainly deriving its impulse from Motilal, Arun Chandra Dutt and others. The whole episode convinced Sri Aurobindo that it was no use "rushing into work" except with tempered and tested instruments and on a sure basis of integral knowledge.³⁶

In the third place, there was some incipient — perhaps subconscious — objection on the part of a few to Mirra the Mother assuming an increasing responsibility for the management of Sri Aurobindo's house and — what was even more to the point and purpose — an increasing responsibility for the welfare, both material and spiritual, of the sadhaks of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. But the clouds passed, and the small community came more than ever closer together; and one of the results was the practice of collective meditation, all the sadhaks gathering in the veranda of Sri Aurobindo's house to experience the joy of spiritual communion.

On 1 January 1922, the Mother took complete charge of the management of Sri Aurobindo's house, and in September the shift to the house in Rue de la Marine took place. The number of inmates was about half a dozen, but increased to over ten next year, and kept going up year by year. The "change" effected by the Mother had two aspects. First, with her French precision and orderliness, augmented by her infallible sense of artistic elegance acquired in Japan, she brought cleanliness, a quiet efficiency and a simple sufficiency into the life of the household that was now an Ashram. Here the

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 206.

testimony of one who has been through it all, Nolini, is of considerable significance:

We do not always notice how very disorderly we are: our belongings and household effects are in a mess, our actions are haphazard, and in our inner life we are as disorderly as in our outer life.... If the brain is a market-place, the heart is no better than a mad-house.... One of the things the Mother has been trying to teach us both by her word and example is this, namely, that to keep our outer life and its materials in proper order and neat and tidy is a very necessary element in our life upon earth.... The Mother taught us to use our things with care.... She uses things not merely with care but with love and affection.³⁷

Secondly, and this was more important still, she "installed Sri Aurobindo on his high pedestal of Master and Lord of Yoga". Again, Nolini has explained the difference, a difference amounting to a revolution in attitude. Previously, Sri Aurobindo was friend and comrade, the prophet of Nationalism and the leader of the Revolution, and although the young men inwardly looked up to him as to a Guru (and not merely as to a chief), this was not always reflected in the outer attitude. The Mother taught the others by her manner and speech and practice what it was to be "disciple" of a "Guru", how they were to condition their mind and soul to receive his Grace:

It was the Mother who opened our eyes and gave us that vision which made us say, even as Arjuna

³⁷ *Reminiscences*, pp. 79-80. The Mother has said: "Not to take care of material things which one uses is a sign of inconstancy and ignorance.... You must take care of it, not because you are attached to it, but because it manifests something of the Divine Consciousness."

had been made to say:

"By whatever name I have called you, O Krishna, O Yadava, O Friend, thinking in my rashness that you were only a friend, and out of ignorance and from affection, not knowing this thy greatness; whatever disrespect I have shown you out of frivolity, whether sitting or lying down or eating, when I was alone or when you were present before me, — may I be pardoned for all that, O thou Infinite One".³⁸

This balance between efficiency in the details of external organisation and the inner attitude of consecration to the Master and Lord of Yoga gave a new form and trembling vitality and a new intensity and tone to the collective life of the sadhaks with Sri Aurobindo. The talks and discussions didn't interfere with the collective meditation, and everything in fact seemed to find its proper place like the several notes in a piece of music. Sri Aurobindo's birthdays were special days to the sadhaks when a fresh self-examination and a renewal of aspiration were possible. Sri Aurobindo himself didn't like the usual outer exuberance in birthday celebrations. "I want to make it as ordinary as any other day", he said in 1923; "I do not like any sort of vital manifestation on that day after taking the new turn in Yoga".³⁹ Nevertheless, the Ashram became on such occasions a home of aspiration, an 'Hour of God' when fresh spiritual effort was possible, and when everyone beamed with joy and a sense of anticipatory fulfilment. It was customary for Sri Aurobindo to make a brief speech on his birthday and also to answer questions. On 15 August 1923, he

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

³⁹ Purani, *Life*, p. 227.

made a reference in his speech to the descent of the supramental Truth, and added:

There is an idea that today every sadhaka gets a new experience. That depends upon your capacity to receive the Truth in yourself. Real spiritual surrender is, of course, quite another matter; but if any of you have experienced even a degree of it, even some faint reflection, then the purpose on the fifteenth will have been served."⁴⁰

In the evening, Sri Aurobindo differentiated between the three layers of the Supermind — the interpretative, the representative and the imperative — and talking in a personal vein gave some indication of "the present state" of the Sadhana:

I cannot call it a state, or a condition. It is, rather, a complex movement. I am at present engaged in bringing the Supermind into the physical consciousness, down even to the sub-material....

One feels as if "digging the earth", as the Veda says. It is literally digging from Supermind above to Supermind below.... The Veda calls it "the two ends" — the head and the tail of the dragon completing and compassing the consciousness... so long as Matter is not supramentalised, the mental and the vital also cannot be fully supramentalised."⁴¹

On the fifty-second birthday in 1924, there was again the same subdued excitement and exhilaration. Recapitulating the events of the day, a sadhak writes:

...we see him everyday, but today it is "Darshan"! Today each sees him individually, one after another.... There he sits — in the royal chair in the

⁴⁰ *Evening Talks*, Second Series, p. 298.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 298-9. Cf. 'A God's Labour' in *Poems Past and Present*.

veranda — royal and majestic. In the very posture there is divine self-confidence.... As one actually stands in front, all curiosity, all pride, all thoughts, all questions, all resolutions are swept away in some terrific divine Niagara.⁴²

The "darshan" was in the morning, and in the evening there was a talk as usual and a brief discussion. He began the speech by remarking that he would have preferred "to communicate through the Silent Consciousness", for one could reach something deeper that way. When a disciple commented, "I was thinking of asking about your Sadhana, but I was afraid of being referred to the 'Silent Consciousness'", Sri Aurobindo blandly asked: "Do you then want me to speak about the Silent Consciousness like Carlyle who preached his doctrine of silence in 40 volumes?"⁴³ Regarding the possibility of his own death, Sri Aurobindo said:

There are three things that can bring it about:

1. Violent surprise and accident; 2. Action of age;
3. My own choice, finding it not possible to do it this time, or by some thing shown to me which would prove it is not possible this time.⁴⁴

When he was asked to give some indication as to the time of the descent of the Supermind, he parried the question: "You want me to prophesy? It does not totally depend upon me; time is about the last thing one knows. And fixing the limit is more likely to prolong it like 'Swaraj in one year'".⁴⁵

On his birthday in 1925, when a disciple asked in the course of the discussion following the talk, "How are the universal conditions more ready now for the coming

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 302-4.

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 308-9.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 310.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 312.

down of the Supermind than they were before?", Sri Aurobindo returned a detailed answer:

Firstly, the knowledge of the physical world has increased so much that it is on the verge of breaking its own bounds.

Secondly, there is an attempt all over the world towards breaking the veil between the outer and the inner mental, the outer and the inner vital and even the outer and the inner physical. Men are becoming more "psychic".

Thirdly, the vital is trying to lay its hold on the physical as it never did before.... Also, the world is becoming more united on account of the discoveries of modern science.... Such a union is the condition for the highest Truth coming down and it is also our difficulty.

Fourthly, the rise of persons who wield tremendous vital influence over large numbers of men.

These are some of the signs to show that the universal condition may be more ready now.⁴⁶

Next year, Sri Aurobindo went almost a little out of the way to lay stress on the importance of the day for the sadhaks' spiritual progress:

...if you came to me in the morning, it should not be in fulfilment of a customary ceremony but with your souls and minds prepared to receive. If you listen to me now, and if it is merely something that touches your mental interest and satisfies a mental interest, I had rather remain silent. But if it touches somewhere the inner being, the soul, then only this day has a utility or a purpose. And the meditation too ought to be under such conditions that even if

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 322-3.

nothing decisive descends, there would be a certain infiltration, the results of which would come afterwards.⁴⁷

Although Sri Aurobindo's birthdays could thus be turned into exceptional opportunities from the point of view of the Yoga, for the sadhaks of course every day in the Guru's house was a special day. The more sensitive among them had the feeling that increasingly they were basking in the ambience of the Spirit radiating from the Guru's power of personality. And the Mother's un-failing solicitude and compassionate understanding were there all the time as protective sheaths insulating the sadhaks from any possibility of mishap. The talks in the evening went on, the core of the company was the same, yet with peripheral changes day by day, owing to the presence of a new sadhak or of a casual visitor. Like bubbles on the surface of a lake, the topics used to come up and the light shone upon them, now on this now on that side, and so they subsided — and others sprang up claiming attention. Not a branch of knowledge was deliberately excluded — all approaches were permissible — and every mood, every quirk of sensibility, every leap of intelligence had its turn. Vaishnavism, Theosophy, Bahaism, Couéism, Gandhism, Nirvikalpa Samadhi, *samatā*, Grace and the Guru, Cosmic Consciousness, the Vedic Gods, Yogic miracles, Ouspensky, Jacob Boehme, M. Théon, astrology, the interpretation of dreams, Kaya Kalpa, Space and Time, Russian Communism, Tagore, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's poetry, current literature, Islamic culture, Indo-English poetry, Art, Education, medicine, psychology — all these and the Sadhana of Supramental Yoga as well! Those of us

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 326.

who were not of the elect might still have some taste of the daily feast of reason and flow of spirit from the records maintained by some of the participants. Besides the two series of *Evening Talks* that Purani has published, there are other recapitulations too of those early conversations — for example, V. Chidanandam's 'Sri Aurobindo at Evening Talk'.⁴⁸ The reporters would themselves readily admit that their renderings do but scant justice to the wondrous flow of speech from that reservoir of sovereign understanding and wisdom. And likewise any attempt at sampling here will do even less justice to Sri Aurobindo's wit or wisdom or vast reserves of intuitive understanding of life's variegated problems. Yet one or two excerpts may be given here chosen almost at random. On 23 August 1925, the talk turned on Shaw's *St. Joan*, and Sri Aurobindo said:

It is no drama at all. Joan talks like a pushing impertinent peasant girl and Charles VII talks like a school urchin and all the rest talk like London shop-boys except when they talk about high subjects, and then they talk like Shaw.⁴⁹

Thus of the Gayatri mantra:

It means: "We choose the Supreme Light of the Divine Sun; we aspire that it may impel our minds".

The Sun is the symbol of the divine Light that is coming down and Gayatri gives expression to the aspiration, asking that divine Light to come down and give impulsion to all the activities of the mind.

In this Yoga also, we want to bring down that divine Sun to govern, not only the mind, but the vital and the physical being also.... It is the capa-

⁴⁸ *Mother India* (1970-2). ⁴⁹ *Evening Talks*, First Series, p. 78.

city to bear the Light that constitutes the fitness for this Yoga.⁵⁰

And on one occasion, observing a spider frantically making web after web to catch the insects, Sri Aurobindo exclaimed:

He has got quite a feast! He is again running to make the web strong. He ties up the moth in a corner and then goes about preparing the web. He knows mathematics.... You see, these spiders are very resourceful. They know what they have to do, and then they learn by experience and experiment.⁵¹

It's all one — spider's web, Egyptian mummy, the Montessori method, Tantra sounds or Ananda consciousness: no subject is too trivial, none too abstruse, but Sri Aurobindo's Light sets it in the right perspective and sheds the requisite clarity on it. It is the Supermind unobtrusively working through the mind and utilising the instrument of speech to say precisely the thing that is necessary and right in each fleeting situation.

V

During 1926, when the sadhaks already numbered about twenty-five, the "evening talks" often centered round the "supramental Yoga" and its practical implications. When some of the disciples tried to cabin the "supramental" in the customary "mental" moulds, Sri Aurobindo said:

All fundamental change will be inner and not outer. That is to say, we shall have attained a

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, Second Series, p. 179.

higher consciousness, and all we do will proceed from that consciousness....

The one thing that Sadhana has done for me is that it has destroyed all "isms" from my mind. If you had asked this question a few years back, I would have told you "it is spiritual communism" or, perhaps, "commerce, culture and commune", as the Chandernagore people say. At that time it was my mind that received the knowledge from Above.... But now if you ask me, I would say "Wait and let us have the Truth down here"....

What we are doing at present is to make ourselves fit instruments for the higher Truth, so that when it came down there would be the proper instrumentation for its working. We won't reject life; we have to bring a new consciousness into the external work....

So far as I am concerned, I have got my work... immediately at present, we have to bring down a change in the physical mind, the nervous being, and the vital mind, so that they may become fit instruments of the Truth. That is a big enough work....⁵²

On 13 July, he said that, for bringing down any higher spiritual force (especially the Supermind) into the earth-plane and the physical being, one had to sit down to it and call it down and hold it, and not prematurely rush into inconsequential action; "therefore I say", he added, "it would be foolish to expect me to go to the Bengal Council and work there".⁵³ The Supermind was a power of consciousness, and if brought down, it would sensitise and make perfect the instruments of mind, life and body.

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 102-5.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 280.

There could thus be no sublimer objective than the endeavour to bring the supramental force into the earth consciousness, and all temporary limitations, all necessary exclusions, would be permissible if they were meant only to advance this aim. Sri Aurobindo said in November 1926, as if pushed by a sense of urgency:

I am trying to bring down the Supramental; things will happen, conditions for its descent will be created. Then there will be no obscurity in the vital or the physical. From the highest standpoint the coming of the Supramental is decided, you can't stand in the way. From the standpoint where we are working, it is an advantage to be aware of the difficulties and to take account of them, and deal with them.⁵⁴

On 6 November 1926, Sri Aurobindo made a direct reference to the world of the Gods — the Overmind world just below Supermind — and indicated that it might come down first, preparing the ground as it were for the climactic supramental descent:

It is possible that there may be a great complexity in manifestation — one can manifest different god-heads in different parts of the being.... There should be no ego if there is to be a divine manifestation.... I spoke about the world of the Gods because not to speak of it would be dangerous. I spoke of it so that the mind may understand the thing if it comes down. I am trying to bring it down into the physical as it can no longer be delayed, and then things may happen....⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 293-4.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 295. A roughly equivalent version appears in V. Chidamnam's 'Sri Aurobindo at Evening Talk' (*Mother India*, July 1970,

This is quite explicit. Sri Aurobindo was trying to bring the "world of the Gods" — in other words, the Overmental principle and power of cosmic Truth — into the physical "as it can no longer be delayed". Clearly, the descent is imminent, and "then things may happen...."

For five or six years previously, the small (if steadily growing) Ashram community were registering experiences — individual as well as collective — and the group seemed to be set on the high road to newer and newer goals of realisation. Several sadhaks had also the human — only too human! — tendency to be impatient, to "expect" miracles and to picture the supramental descent and the supramental transformation in mental terms which necessarily introduced elements of falsity and futility. The vital nature might sometimes think of the Supermind as just a superior vital force — Nietzschean or something similar — but that kind of mental aberration could lead to megalomania and loss of balance. The Supramental was visualised by Sri Aurobindo as Truth-Consciousness, or complete Truth and complete effectivity seeping into all the levels of existence down to the material. The whole adventure of transformation of consciousness — the mind's movements, the conflicting pulls of the vital, the body's cells with their molecular energies: the charging of all these with the Truth and effec-

p. 333): "I did not speak of many of these things before, for then it was dangerous. Now not to speak anything may be dangerous, for I am pulling down the supramental into the physical... (which) means the coming of the supramental Purusha, the supramental Principle, and also supramental beings and personalities. It can be delayed no longer.... From the highest standpoint the supramental descent has been decided and nobody can resist it. From the standpoint of the conditions in which we are working, we have to see the obstacles... it is an advantage to be aware of the difficulties and thus be prepared to deal with them."

tivity of the Supramental Consciousness so that no thought, no vital desire, no cellular activity might accomplish anything other than what is true, what is right and what is fully purposive — this adventure was the very pith and marrow of the Yoga; and for complete success in it, the aspiration, the descent and the transformation had to be total, and comprehend every layer and every corner and every tremor of human and of earth nature. Even if one individual could first succeed in this adventure — or to the extent he succeeded — the benefits would flow to the whole world. As Sri Aurobindo said on his birthday in 1925:

I am not doing an isolated Yoga.... It is true that my Yoga is not for humanity (but for the Divine); but it is not for myself either; of course, my attaining to the Siddhi is the preliminary condition to others being able to attain it.⁵⁶

But if the forerunner was to have some chance of success — success in the total transformation of consciousness — he needs must concentrate wholly, or almost wholly, on the work. The gains of the Yoga, during the immediately preceding years, had been impressive enough. The higher powers were being progressively brought down to inform and interpenetrate the lower levels of consciousness. As the Mother has remarked:

The consciousness is like a ladder: at each great epoch there has been one great being capable of adding one more step to the ladder and reaching a place where the ordinary consciousness had never been... adding one more step to the ladder without losing contact with the material (consciousness),... to reach the Highest and at the same time connect

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 318.

the top with the bottom.... To go up and down and join the top to the bottom is the whole secret of realisation, and that is the work of the Avatar.⁵⁷ Not to break loose or escape, but to connect or enlarge, was the bridge-builder's task. The way up shouldn't mean a cancellation of the way down. As interpreted by T.V. Kapali Sastry, the first boon Nachiketas secures from Yama in the *Kathopanishad* really involves the power "to come back from the higher plane to the physical with the connection between this and the life beyond established, maintaining the thread of consciousness".⁵⁸ Always to extend, to connect, to integrate — to stand the magic ladder on the ground of the inconscient and against the summit of the Spirit — to throw a golden bridge between the hither and thither extremities — this had been the adventure of consciousness, and the adventure must go on.

Early in 1926, Sri Aurobindo decided that the time had come to make a new determined move: he would now entrust the Ashram — both the outer management and the spiritual direction — to the Mother, and retire into complete seclusion. From the beginning of 1926, the Mother thus began to assume more and more of Sri Aurobindo's responsibility for the spiritual guidance of the sadhaks, as if giving him the needed relief so that he might attend to his own more important work. An air of intensity began building up slowly, an air of expectancy; and the sadhaks had the feeling that they were on the threshold of new developments. After Sri Aurobindo's birthday, the evening talks took on a new fervour and potency, and it was as though the light

⁵⁷ *Mother India*, December 1967, pp. 667-8 (from her talks of 1930-1).

⁵⁸ *Lights on the Upanishads* (1947), p. 95.

of a tremendous new realisation was transfiguring Sri Aurobindo's person into that of the Golden Purusha. In the evenings, the group meditation started later and later, not at half-past four as formerly, but at six or seven or eight, and once well past midnight. But the sadhaks, far from being put out, took it all as part of a preordained drama, and in fact many of them felt as though they were themselves being invaded by a terrific new force, as though they were undergoing the throes of a spiritual rebirth.

Then came the great day, 24 November 1926. As she saw Sri Aurobindo emerge from his room in the evening, the Mother knew that a momentous descent had taken place, and she immediately sent word that all the sadhaks should assemble in the veranda, the usual place of meditation, and by six all were there. The rest had best be described in the words of A. B. Purani, one of those present at the time to receive the Master's benedictions:

There was a deep silence.... Many saw an oceanic flood of Light rushing down from above. Everyone present felt a kind of pressure above his head. The whole atmosphere was charged with some electrical energy.... With a slow dignified step the Mother came out first, followed by Sri Aurobindo with his majestic gait.... The Mother sat on a small stool to his right.

Silence absolute... overflowing with divinity. The meditation lasted about forty-five minutes. After that, one by one the disciples bowed to the Mother.... After the blessings, in the same silence there was a short meditation.

In the interval of silent meditation and blessings

many had distinct experiences.... It was certain that a Higher Consciousness had descended on earth....

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother went inside. Immediately Datta was inspired. In that silence she spoke: "The Lord has descended into the physical today".⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Life*, pp. 246-7.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE TEN LIMBS OF THE YOGA

I

The 'Siddhi' of 24 November 1926 was a decisive stage in Sri Aurobindo's mission, since it meant — as he explained later — "the descent of Krishna into the physical". On 11 November he had said that he was trying to bring down the "world of the Gods", and had almost hinted that the descent was imminent. In the Aurobindonian Weltanschauung, the "world of the Gods" was the Overmind world just below the Supermind:

If we regard the Powers of the Reality as so many Godheads, we can say that the Overmind releases a million Godheads into action, each empowered to create its own world, each world capable of relation, communication and interplay with the others. There are in the Veda different formulations of the nature of the Gods: it is said they are all one Existence to which the sages give various names yet each God is worshipped as if he by himself is that Existence, one who is all the other Gods together or contains them in his being...¹

When the "descent of Krishna" thus actually took place on 24 November, it only signified the fullness of the Overmental realisation. And the event was not only important in itself, but could very well be the preparation for — and the promise of — the Supramental descent itself and the consequent transfiguration of the whole arc of human existence down to the physical and the incon-

¹ *The Life Divine*, p. 335.

scient. On the other hand, Sri Aurobindo had warned his disciples that egoism and divine manifestation couldn't abide together; and hence "all noise should be only incidental".² This was how 24 November 1926 passed without any fanfare, without speeches, and without even the customary evening conversation. Only Datta's words "The Lord has descended into the physical today" had for a brief second broken that supernal silence; and what was it but a simple announcement wrung in a moment of sudden divination?

However, it was actually some days later that the disciples grasped the full implications of the event, for Sri Aurobindo, if he had shown them for a brief immaculate hour the *rûpa* of Delight of Existence, had also afterwards withdrawn into effective retirement. No more discourses, no more evening talks! The Mother was there, of course, and now more than ever solicitous of their general — and especially spiritual — welfare, but it was not easy to get reconciled to Sri Aurobindo's total withdrawal into this self-forged seclusion. When somebody ventured to complain, Sri Aurobindo wrote to say that he had decided — as much in their interest as for his own convenience — that they should henceforth receive the light and the force from the Mother, and be guided by her in their sadhana. Even on 24 November — as the disciples now remembered — he had blessed them, as it were through the Mother as the intermediary. And they realised soon enough that all was indeed for the best, and complete seclusion was necessary for Sri Aurobindo if he was to bring his own sadhana to its preordained fulfilment.

This, then, was the significance of the "siddhi" day.

² *Evening Talks*, Second Series, p. 295.

The Lord of the Yoga went into the background, the Mother assumed full responsibility for the sadhana of the disciples, and the 'Sri Aurobindo Ashram' formally came into existence. Nor was Sri Aurobindo's seclusion really total. He gave *darśan* to the disciples and select visitors on three days in the year — 21 February (the Mother's birthday), 15 August (Sri Aurobindo's birthday) and 24 November (the Siddhi day) — and, from 1939, a fourth day, 24 April (the day of the Mother's second coming), was added. Also, he occasionally broke the rule of retirement in favour of visitors like Rabin-dranath Tagore and Sylvain Levi. Further, since the Mother and one or two disciples kept in constant touch with Sri Aurobindo and since he answered in detail the letters from his disciples posing their problems, his involvement in the Ashram community was as intimate as ever though the form may have changed. The Lord of the Yoga was no symbol figure-head, but the invisible yet subliminal reality behind the Ashram's functioning.

II

Before describing the Ashram — its attempt to realise the ideal of a "typic society" as visualised by the Mother or a "Deva Sangha" of Sri Aurobindo's conception — it would be appropriate to take a look at the Yoga itself. We saw in the previous chapter how, in the course of his letter to Barindra in 1920, Sri Aurobindo remarked that the "Guru of the world" had given him "the ten limbs of the body of this Yoga". This was presented as a spiritual philosophy in *The Life Divine* and, more particularly, as a practical treatise in *The Synthesis of*

Yoga. The latter was begun as a serial in the first (August 1914) issue of the *Arya* — and although seventy-three chapters appeared in all — it had not quite concluded when the journal ceased publication in 1921. At the time *The Life Divine* or *The Synthesis of Yoga* was written, Sri Aurobindo had not found the name “overmind” to describe the state of consciousness just below Supermind, and hence it didn’t figure in the *Arya*. When *The Life Divine* was revised in the late nineteen thirties, Sri Aurobindo added the last chapter in the first volume to explain the role of the “Overmind”, and it figures too in the final chapters of the second volume. Sri Aurobindo had likewise hoped to make good the omission in the contemplated additional chapters to *The Synthesis*, “but these latter chapters were not written”.³

The Synthesis of Yoga as now published (1955) in a single omnibus volume contains a new Introduction (‘The Conditions of the Synthesis’), the fully revised Part I (‘The Yoga of Divine Work’), the slightly revised Part II (‘The Yoga of Integral Knowledge’), and the unrevised Parts III and IV (‘The Yoga of Divine Love’ and ‘The Yoga of Self-Perfection’). An additional if incomplete chapter entitled ‘The Supermind and the Yoga of Works’ has been appended to Part II, opening up some more vistas of possibility. Although the rounded and shining finish of *The Life Divine* is lacking in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, this too is a mighty testament running to over one thousand pages, only a little less in bulk than the complementary Supramental Manifesto. The entire work has been translated into French by the Mother as *La Synthèse des Yoga*, and the English, French and Hindi versions have been appearing side by

³ *On Yoga* II, Tome One, p. 285.

side since 1958 in the trilingual edition of the *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*. Wide-ranging in its scope, the emphasis still is on synthesis, integration, unity of aim and coordination of means. However, the little trodden paths of Sri Aurobindo's Supramental Yoga — newly cleared by him but not yet macadamised for others' use — have not been brought into the scheme of *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Hints are thrown out here and there, but a full statement has been deferred. There is a tendency to repetition because Yoga after Yoga is separately described and assessed, and because the circumstance of periodical publication required recapitulation from time to time; but these are repetitions with a difference and integral to the scheme of the work. The total effect is of the epic churning of the ocean, each revolving motion bringing forth its own characteristic products, and the whole action geared to the final coming of the nectar itself.

All life is Yoga: such is the challenging epigraph with which Sri Aurobindo launches his work. The new Introduction is a masterly statement of the "conditions" of the proposed "synthesis" and is meant to prepare the reader for the encircling and spiralling argument of the following pages. There are "two necessities of Nature's workings" which are apt to assume the dual movement of convergence towards unity and divergence towards multiplicity. Forms that were once alive are now dead; and as life changes, there is need also to renovate old forms by charging them with new life or to create altogether new forms. What a world we are living in —

We are in an age, full of the throes of travail, when all forms of thought and activity that have in themselves any strong power of utility or any secret

virtue of persistence are being subjected to a supreme test and given their opportunity of rebirth. The world today presents the aspect of a huge cauldron of Medea in which all things are being cast, shredded into pieces, experimented on, combined and recombined either to perish and provide the scattered material of new forms or to emerge rejuvenated and changed for a fresh term of existence.⁴

In this situation, Indian Yoga could be "potentially one of these dynamic elements for the future life of humanity". Yoga is quite simply the movement or effort towards self-perfection reuniting "God and Nature in a liberated and perfected human life". There is of course the primordial process of natural evolution which is unconscious, slow and subject to uncertainties and serious set-backs, while it is man's prerogative to make the conscious and organised effort of Yoga forging "the harmony of our inner and outer activities and experiences in the divine consummation of both", thereby compressing into a single life — or a few years or a few months — what Nature might have taken centuries or aeons to accomplish. Yoga thus makes an intense and exceptional use of powers that are already there. While science exploits steam, electricity or nuclear power, Yoga harnesses man's psychological or other powers. Both science and Yoga are based on knowledge developed and confirmed by regular experiment, practical analysis and constant assessment of results. But there is a need for caution too: just as "science in the service of man" should not mean mere gadgetry and the tyranny of cybernetics, Yoga too should not become a matter of

⁴ *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1955), pp. 3-4.

technique and process, for that would mean an impoverishment — not an enrichment — of life. "The true and full object and utility of Yoga", says Sri Aurobindo, "can only be accomplished when the conscious Yoga in man becomes, like the subconscious Yoga in Nature, outwardly coterminous with life itself".⁵

There are three rungs in the ladder of life — bodily life, mental life, divine life — which God and Nature have provided for man's ascent towards self-perfection culminating in a "trinity of transcendent existence, self-awareness and self-delight" (Sachchidananda). To find this Transcendent, to link it with the life in Nature, and to possess the power freely to ascend or descend the great stair of existence would be the perspective programme of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. Of all living beings, man alone is "perfectly made" — so the gods of the Aitareya Upanishad thought! — and man could therefore be the mould of the further divine perfection to come. The distinctive feature of bodily life is not so much progress as persistence through the perpetuation of the species. In mental life, the keynote is continual enlargement, improvement and the pull towards endless change and variability. In spiritual life or divine existence, the mind hankers after a self-existent perfection and immutable infinity and can find peace only when these are realised. If the mind starts regulating the bodily life, the externals alone are rapidly changed and we may be caught up in a materialism that can only bring "great wearinesses, swift exhaustions, startling recoils".⁶ On the contrary, if spirituality should come to mean mere asceticism, that will merely impoverish life and weaken its base.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 7. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 24.

In the different systems of Yoga, the consenting parties are three: God or Purusha, Nature or Prakriti, and the individual human soul. Man being a thinker and a doer, he has the freedom to aspire nobly and engage in appropriate action, thereby giving himself the push towards perfection or union with the Divine. Since Yoga has been defined as the organised effort towards self-perfection, India's Yogic systems have found it convenient to seize and maximise the use of one or another of the several instruments or faculties lodged in man as the means of promoting such progressive self-improvement:

The principle of Yoga is the turning of one or of all powers of our human existence into a means of reaching the divine Being. In an ordinary Yoga one main power of being or one group of its powers is made the means, vehicle, path. In a synthetic Yoga all powers will be combined and included in the transmuting instrumentation.⁷

In the language of modern military strategy, it is an all-out attack, involving the deployment of the army, the navy and the air force, and paratroops and propaganda as well, that storms the citadel and establishes dominion. Likewise, in an integral Yoga, the storm-troops of the muscle, the swift-squadrons of the brain, and the high-powered flotillas of the heart, all are to be energised and directed to march up and seize the invisible citadel of Reality. In Sri Aurobindo's words —

Each Yoga in its process has the character of the instrument it uses; thus the Hathayogic process is psycho-physical, the Rajayogic mental and psychic, the way of knowledge is spiritual and cognitive, the way of devotion spiritual, emotional and

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 695.

aesthetic, the way of works spiritual and dynamic by action. Each is guided in the ways of its own characteristic power. But all power is in the end one, all power is really soul-power.⁸

Since all is verily soul-power, it is this that has to be mobilised and canalised. All the powers lodged in man that are really emanations of the Spirit have thus to be purified and disciplined into a body of troops filled with the zeal and imbued with the determination to invade Reality, to possess it, to bring it down so that the desired change and transformation could be accomplished.

The body, the mind, the ratiocinative and discriminating intellect, the will, the heart, any one of these by itself could be made the means of steady self-improvement or self-purification. In Hatha Yoga, the body is the principal agent of transformation, and the principle of action is based on the close connection between the body and the soul. For the Hathayogin, the body is indeed "a mystic bridge between the spiritual and the physical being", and his whole aim is to awaken the soul in the physical body and make it realise the purity, power, light, and freedom that are native to it. Through the disciplines of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* — in other words, through the systematic and complete control of the limbs and of breathing — the Hathayogin achieves control of his body's vital energy and links it with the universal energy. The three principles of practice common to all Yoga — *purification* of the instrument, *concentration* or intensity of effort towards a desired end, and *liberation* or "release of our being from the narrow and painful knots of the individualised energy in a false and limited play" — are the steps leading to the *consumma-*

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 697.

tion or union with the Supreme.⁹ In Hathayoga, the *āsanas* which are perhaps over eighty in number help to make the body healthy, strong, supple and free from fatigue and rapid decay, while *prāṇayāma* aims at purifying the nervous system and circulating the life-energy freely through all the nerves. By thus perfecting the body and the breathing — the *annamaya* and *pranamaya* sheaths mentioned in the Taittiriya Upanishad — the Hathayogin reaches his desired goal.

In Rajayoga, the mind — the *manomaya kośa* — is the theatre of action and the field of victory. Through the discipline of the movements of the mind, Rajayoga achieves the total mastery of consciousness. The Hathayogic techniques of *āsana* and *prāṇayāma* are used with-in reason, and to these is added the incantation of the mantra, and the large aim is to accomplish the body's purification and self-mastery and also to awaken the reserves of power in the inconscient depths of the physical nature:

The whole energy of the soul is not at play in the physical body and life, the secret powers of mind are not awake in it, the bodily and nervous energies predominate. But all the while the supreme energy is there, asleep; it is said to be coiled up and slumbering like a snake, — therefore it is called the *kundalinī śakti*, — in the lowest of the Chakras, in the *mulādhāra*. When by Pranayama the division between the upper and lower Prana currents in the body is dissolved, this Kundalini is struck and awakened, it uncoils itself and begins to rise upward like a fiery serpent breaking open each lotus as it ascends until the Shakti meets the Purusha in the

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 603.

brahma-randhra in a deep samadhi of union.¹⁰

The aim in Rajayoga is invariably the trance of samadhi when the pure still mind is possessed by (and possesses for the nonce) the highest supra-cosmic knowledge. To withdraw the mind first from the multiplicity of outward phenomena — to fix the concentrated attention on one object (a *rupa* or a *mantra*) alone — and finally to transcend all outer consciousness in the infinite immobility of the cessation of normal consciousness: this is the Rajayogin's way and goal. In Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, while physical techniques are not taboo and are, in fact, found "useful at times in certain stages of the progress", they are not deemed essential. Besides, it is not the transcendence of the physical base of life in *samādhi*, but rather its transfiguration through the descent of the Spirit that is the aim of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. "Our object is", says Sri Aurobindo, "to make the spiritual life and its experiences fully active and fully utilisable in the waking state and even in the normal use of the functions".¹¹

There are, then, the three classical paths — Karma Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga. In Karma Yoga, the *will*, the will to action — the resolve to activate the right creative urge — is the protagonist. Through purification or the renunciation of egoistic self-indulgence and total indifference to the "fruits" of action and through concentration or complete absorption in the action itself, the Karmayogin makes himself the vehicle of the universal energy, and achieves release and fulfilment in the completion of the work; in the result, he has become a willing tool in whom the Lord of that energy has manifested himself:

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 612. ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 40.

impulse that is a force from the supreme Ananda.¹² In Jnanayoga, the ratiocinative and discriminating intellect is the actor: through the discipline of self-inquiry, *ātmavicāra*, through the dialectic of negating layer after layer of illusive 'appearance', Jnanayoga perseveres towards the Truth by means of *viveka* or right discrimination, and achieves knowledge of the self with the triumphant affirmation of identity with the Brahman:

This pure Jnanayoga comes by the intellect, although it ends in the transcendence of the intellect and its workings. The thinker in us separates himself from all the rest of what we phenomenally are, rejects the heart, draws back from the life and the senses, separates from the body that he may arrive at his own exclusive fulfilment in that which is beyond even himself and his function.¹³

The sheaths of body, sense, mind, all aspects of our phenomenal being, all are seen to be mere vestiges of Nature or Prakriti, or as the tantalising play of *māyā*. The One alone — the Illimitable Permanent — remains; all else is nothing, less than nothing.

In Bhakti Yoga, or the Way of Love and Devotion, the sovereign actor is the heart: through the purification of human emotions and human relationships and their elevation to an one-pointed and blissful condition of participation in divine love, the Bhaktiyogin emancipates himself from the turbulent vicissitudes of everyday existence and becomes a sharer in the divine *līlā* of the

¹² *ibid.*, p. 306.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 329.

Lord who is the all-beautiful, the all-loving, the all-blissful:

The God-lover is the universal lover and he embraces the All-blissful and All-beautiful. When universal love has seized on his heart, it is the decisive sign that the Divine has taken possession of him; and when he has the vision of the All-beautiful everywhere and can feel at all times the bliss of his embrace, that is the decisive sign that he has taken possession of the Divine.¹⁴

The God-lover is also the beloved of the Lord, and in their mutual possession is the proof of the blissful oneness of Reality. But who can describe the ecstasy of such spiritual union? In Sri Aurobindo's words —

...it is not possible for the tongue of human speech to tell all the utter unity and all the eternal variety of the Ananda of divine love. Our higher and our lower members are both flooded with it, the mind and life no less than the soul; even the physical body takes its share of the joy, feels the touch, is filled in all its limbs, veins, nerves with the flowing of the wine of the ecstasy, *amṛta*. Love and Ananda are the last word of being, the secret of secrets, the mystery of mysteries.¹⁵

God is the invoked charioteer guiding the Karmayogin through the embattled field of Kurukshetra: God is the transcendent experience of Sachchidananda: and God is the beloved Lord and Lover who responds utterly to the heart's longing for delight. And it is the same God too!

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 675.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 690.

III

Numberless are the men and women who have followed one of these pathways to felicity, and they have found no reason to turn back. The great overwhelming mass of humanity has, however, remained behind. And there has not been effected any total change in the human situation. The several Yogas therefore seem to suffer from two drawbacks. In the first place, this excessive emphasis on one element or faculty alone — body, mind, intellect, will, heart — in the human complex cannot but lead to an one-sided (or lop-sided) development, causing thereby an attenuation or alienation or impoverishment of life. The ascetic's rejection of even good and auspicious things is to that extent a negation of life. If the mind has its realisations, the heart too has its own goals of fulfilment. The contemplation of Truth or the Higher Knowledge need not exclude good works, and these again need not deny the claims of the heart. The man of knowledge could be doubled with the man of action, and both could achieve co-existence with the man of devotion. The body athletic, electric, aesthetic, the mind in a trance of self-lost supernal stillness, the ratiocinative intellect forging the supreme identity "I am Brahman", the determined will to action enacting the truth of *yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam* ("Yoga is skill in works"), and the heart leaping out to an embrace of (or by) God, each of these movements — when that alone is pursued to the total ignorance of all others — tends by its very success to derogate the importance of other realisations. Reality is not cosmic energy alone, nor universal stillness, nor knowledge, nor good works, nor love — none of these alone. The attempt to maxi-

mise the function of any one alone of the divers human faculties can succeed only through the ignorance or suppression of the other faculties which have their rights too to survive and thrive. It is the *whole* man that needs to make the leap in evolution, and not merely a part of him.

Another possible objection to these Yogas is that they create something analogous to a "brain-drain" in the affairs of humanity. The Hathayogin and the Rajayogin, while they may be solving their problems in their own way, leave the rest of humanity just where they are and always have been. The Jnanayogin who has found the Absolute hardly affects the fortunes of the multitude who still go their rounds of petty desires and corroding incapacity. An aim higher still than personal salvation would be service of humanity or service of the Divine:

The desire of personal salvation, however high its form, is an outcome of ego... If we seek the Divine, it should be for the sake of the Divine and for nothing else... all other motives are excrescences....

Often we see this desire of personal salvation overcome by another attraction which also belongs to the higher turn of our nature.... It is that which is implied in the great legend of the Amitabha Buddha who turned away when his spirit was on the threshold of Nirvana and took the vow never to cross it while a single being remained in the sorrow and the Ignorance. It is that which underlies the sublime verse of the Bhagavata Purana, "I desire not the supreme state with all its eight siddhis nor the cessation of rebirth; may I assume the sor-

row of all creatures who suffer and enter into them so that they may be made free from grief".¹⁶

The Buddha, the Jivanmukta, and Prahladas like Ramanuja who are eager to share the burden of everyday human care, these are the type that the mass of men need as helpers, guides, friends, consolers, redeemers. The Karmayogin could be an active helper of his fellow-men, healing their hurts and fighting their battles. The Bhaktiyogin, although he is generally lost in the ecstasy of divine love, has often been able to infect others too — sometimes tens of thousands — with his own sense of intoxication and fervour of love's realisation. All the same, the general run of Yogins have been more interested in effecting an escape from the obstreperous problems of humanity than in facing and mastering them. This flight of the elect, the emancipated, the inheritors of the power and glory of Realisation cannot but deprive the rest of mankind of their counsel and leadership. But not even for humanity, only for the Divine Sri Aurobindo would have us do Yoga; after all, isn't humanity too comprehended in the Divine's play of manifestation? What is necessary, what is crucial, is the annulment of the ego through union with the Divine, and once this has been achieved, action would arise "spontaneously, freely, infallibly from the light and force of our spiritual self in union with the Divine".¹⁷

It is not as though the five Yogas mentioned above are to be viewed as being necessarily independent of one another. Hathayoga and Rajayoga have their obvious affiliations, and *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma* could be practised with advantage by almost all, yogins and non-yogins alike. And the paths of Knowledge, Works and Love

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 308-9. ¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 315.

could easily converge into a single highway:

Divine Love should normally lead to the perfect knowledge of the Beloved by perfect intimacy, thus becoming a path of Knowledge, and to divine service, thus becoming a path of Works. So also should perfect Knowledge lead to perfect Love and Joy and a full acceptance of the works of That which is known; dedicated Works to the entire love of the Master of the Sacrifice and the deepest knowledge of His ways and His being. It is in this triple path that we come most readily to the absolute knowledge, love and service of the One in all beings and in Its entire manifestation.¹⁸

While such a happy convergence of the triple paths is no doubt a possibility, it is nevertheless seldom realised except with persons uniquely endowed, while it has been far easier to pursue one line alone to its logical conclusion.

The problem therefore is to devise a Yoga that aims at realisation *here* and not in a world to come, and makes personal realisation the starting-point or the means for effecting a radical transformation of individual and collective man or the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth in our midst. The aim should be to effect a total change in body, life, mind, will, emotion, thereby outgrowing man's current limitations and imperfections and reaching a superman's puissance, tranquillity, knowledge, power, love. Is such a Yoga well within the bounds of practical formulation? Sri Aurobindo is, however, certain that it will not do merely to make a jumble of the different Yogas in the name of "synthesis", hoping that somehow sensational results will follow.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 44.

Neither can the trying out of one Yoga after another — Hatha first, then Raja, and so on — engineer the great result we have in mind. Even an example like that of the Paramahansa isn't meant to be imitated by everybody as a recipe of Yogic versatility:

In the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we see a colossal spiritual capacity, first driving straight to the divine realisation, taking, as it were, the kingdom of heaven by violence, and then seizing upon one Yogic method after another and extracting the substance out of it with an incredible rapidity, always to return to the heart of the whole matter, the realisation and possession of God by the power of love, by the extension of inborn spirituality into various experience and by the spontaneous play of an intuitive knowledge.¹⁹

If the disciplines of the various Yogas are not simply to be fortuitously thrown together and if we are not to make an example of the unpredictably unique phenomenon of the Paramahansa, we have to discover and bring into operation a principle that perhaps holds the key to the mastery of *all* the disciplines. It should be something akin to the discovery of nuclear power which has lately revolutionised our knowledge of the older sciences of physics, chemistry, biology, geology and medicine. What was once thought to be the atom, a minute speck of lifeless, motionless, unbreakable matter, is now seen to be a universe in itself, with its own incredible inhabitants whirling at terrific speeds, repeating in miniature the mysteries of the outer universe. And the nucleus and its constituents seem to hold the clue to many things, and they flaunt a capability both to effect

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 45.

total ruin and to usher in an era of comfort, health and happiness to mankind. The challenge is to tap this dangerous prepotent source of energy and mobilise it for peaceful, instead of destructive, uses and purposes. Might it not be that, deep within the world of man there is — akin to this nuclear power — a reserve of incommensurable spiritual energy which, rightly tapped and mobilised in due measure, can take up the faculties of body, mind, intellect, will and emotion, and fuse them into a new engine of illimitable power for bringing about the transformation of our earth-life?

Sri Aurobindo finds such a principle, such a key, in the old system of Tantra which, even like the Vedanta, has had its own hoary traditions and historic vicissitudes. Contrasting the Vedantic and Tantric approaches to Yoga, Sri Aurobindo writes:

In a sense, all the schools we have hitherto examined are Vedantic in their principle; their force is in knowledge, their method is knowledge.... In all the lord of the Yoga is the Purusha, the Conscious Soul that knows, observes, attracts, governs. But in Tantra it is rather Prakriti, the Nature-Soul, the Energy, the Will-in-Power executive in the universe. It was by learning and applying the intimate secrets of this Will-in-Power, its method, its Tantra, that the Tantric Yogin pursued the aims of his discipline, — mastery, perfection, liberation, beatitude. Instead of drawing back from manifested Nature and its difficulties, he confronted them, seized and conquered....

We have in this central Tantric conception one side of the truth, the worship of the Energy, the Shakti, as the sole effective force for all attainment.

We get the other extreme in the Vedantic conception of the Shakti as a power of Illusion and in the search after the silent inactive Purusha as the means of liberation from the deceptions created by the active Energy. But in the integral conception the Conscious Soul is the Lord, the Nature-Soul is his executive Energy.²⁰

If the two poles of reality are Brahman and Shakti — Spirit and Nature — Being and Becoming — then the method of the Tantra is not the ascetic's denial, nor an attempt to flee from life and nature into the Bliss of Brahman, but rather is it a bold confrontation and mastery of the forces and processes of life and nature so as to "raise nature in man into manifest power of spirit". The Hathayogic way of the opening up of the nervous centres for facilitating the movement through them of the awakened Shakti on her way to union with Brahman, the Rajayogic way of purification, meditation and concentration, the triple leverage of will-force, knowledge and devotion derived from the 'paths' of Karma, Jnana and Bhakti, all are taken into the synthetic system of the Tantra. But all this is no haphazard assembly of the powers and methods of the different Yogas but a psychologically satisfying integration, constituting a decisive advance on the earlier Yogas:

In two directions it enlarges by its synthetic turn the province of the Yogic method. First, it lays its hand firmly on many of the main springs of human quality, desire, action and it subjects them to an intensive discipline with the soul's mastery of its motives as a first aim and their elevation to a diviner spiritual level as its final utility. Again, in its

²⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

objects of Yoga not only liberation (*mukti*), which is the one all-mastering preoccupation of the specific systems, but a cosmic enjoyment (*bhukti*) of the Power of the Spirit, which the others may take incidentally on the way, in part, casually, but avoid making a motive or object. It is a bolder and larger method.²¹

For a moment we may return to the nuclear analogy. During the last twenty-five years, mankind has regretted from time to time that the atom was ever split at all and the nucleus was ever penetrated; but we also know that vain are all these regrets. Today knowledgeable people are speculating about the peaceful uses of atomic energy — and we have passed beyond mere speculation as regards radioisotopes for medicine, nuclear power for fuel and nuclear-powered ships, and so on. There was doubtless incalculable danger in meddling with the atom; and we know that the world today is poised on the precipice Perilous reared up by the nuclear super-powers. On the other hand, we cannot fail to glimpse the vistas of wondrous possibility open to mankind, and our hope is that the false propensities and pulls of the present will be effectively neutralised by our reviving sanity and will to survive. Nature in her great fecundity and infinite variety throws up lava upon lava of energy, and torrid heat, torrents of rain, rivers in spate, all have their destructive and creative potentialities. The adventure of civilisation consists in meeting and mastering the challenge of Nature's virility and violence, and turning them to beneficial uses. In like manner, within man too are lodged whole dynamos of energy with explosive possibilities, although they are also capable of being controlled

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 698.

and chastened, and directed to noble ends. The body's native vigour and vitality, the rivers of energy ready to burst their confines and overrun the inner countries, the insurrections in the heart, these and other human faculties and powers may not easily be ignored, or not for long; for they have a way of taking their revenge upon us.

Nuclear energy simply *is*: it is neither evil nor good in itself, it is the use to which man puts it that makes it one or the other. Nature likewise simply *is*; all thoughts that seethe in the human brain, all passions that rage, all loves and hates that bring us together or tear us apart, all the body's bottled-up energies, all assertions and movements of the will, and also all the obscure currents and eddies in the dark hinterland of the subconscious — all have their origin in Nature or Prakriti. We cannot long ignore them, we cannot for ever run away from them, and we must not allow them to master or enslave us. The proper way would be to face them, understand them, purify them, and tame and turn their terrific potentialities into purposive use:

Yoga is nothing but practical psychology... (Nature) is the self-fulfilment of the Purusha through his Energy. But the movement of Nature is two-fold, higher and lower... divine and undivine. The distinction exists indeed for practical purposes only. ...All things are in Nature and all things are in God.... The lower Nature, that which we know and are and must remain so long as the faith in us is not changed, acts through limitation and division, is of the nature of ignorance, and culminates in the life of the ego; but the higher Nature, that to which we aspire, acts by unification and transcendence of

limitation, is of the nature of Knowledge and culminates in the life divine. The passage from the lower to the higher is the aim of Yoga... the whole difference between the Yogin and the natural man will be this, that the Yogin seeks to substitute in himself for the integral action of the lower Nature working in and by ego and division the integral action of the higher Nature working in and by God and unity....

The method we have to pursue, then, is to put our whole conscious being into relation and contact with the Divine and to call Him in to transform our entire being into His, so that in a sense God Himself, the real Person in us, becomes the sadhaka of the sadhana as well as the Master of the Yoga by whom the lower personality is used as the centre of a divine transfiguration and instrument of its own perfection.²²

The reference to nuclear energy above may gain added significance when we recall Sri Aurobindo's amazing anticipation just before he went into retirement in 1926. Even fifty years ago, science had gone beyond the old view that atoms were the ultimate particles of matter; actually atoms were microscopic solar systems, the nucleus taking the place of the Sun. Secondly, atoms of different elements were seen to differ, not on account of the constituents which were the same, but in their number and arrangement. Commenting on these, Sri Aurobindo said:

According to the experience of ancient Yogis...
Agni is threefold:

1) ordinary fire, *jaḍa agni*,

²² *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

- 2) electric fire, *vaidyuta agni*,
- 3) solar fire, *saura agni*.

Science has only entered upon the first and second of these fires. The fact that the atom is like the solar system could lead it to the knowledge of the third.²³

Nuclear power is evidently solar fire or *saura agni*, but how about Agni the 'mystic Fire', the source even of *saura agni*? Isn't he the first of the Powers, "at once the flame on the altar and the priest of the oblation", the force behind everything everywhere in the phenomenal universe? If the scientist could smash the atom and release nuclear power, why shouldn't the Yogi be able to smash the ego which is the ultimate resistant to individual and collective liberation, and thereby release the spiritual Agni that holds the key to all other sources of energy and all the so-called "laws of Nature"? Modern science knows that Matter and Energy are convertible in terms of the equation $E=mc^2$, but Yoga might be able, by wresting the secret of the fundamental Agni itself, to effect a radical change and transformation of our life. In Satprem's words,

To transform Matter into Energy it (science) knows only of physical processes producing great temperatures, but if one has the fundamental Agni which is the substance of Energy and of Conscious-Force, one can, in principle, manipulate Matter and come to the same transmutation without reducing one's own body to the state of a living torch.²⁴

Hence the constant stress in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga on

²³ Quoted in Satprem's *Sri Aurobindo or The Adventure of Consciousness*, translated by Tehmi (1968), pp. 336-7.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 340.

the need to crack the shell of the ego and release the sovereign power of the Spirit, the native creative force of the fundamental Agni.

We thus come back to the central issue between ego and division on the one hand and God and unity on the other. The aim of the Yoga is to substitute the urges and movements of the ego by the involvement and participation of God so that all thoughts, all actions, all laws may be directed towards unity, harmony and ananda rather than division, strife and misery. Of the three terms in the Yoga — the *sādhaka* or the practitioner, the *sādhana* or the process, and the *siddhi* or the consummation of the Yoga — the *sādhaka* is the individual Yogin who is also to a greater or lesser extent the representative and vanguard of the race, the *siddhi* is the effective identification and union with the Purusha and the resulting accession of power for the laying of the foundations of a New Life on the earth, and the mediating *sādhana* is the dynamic process, as in an atomic reactor, by which the innate faculties and potentialities of our life (all the latent material, vital, mental and psychic energies) are integrally transformed from the 'lower' Nature to the 'higher' Nature or Supernature. In the final reckoning, of course, God alone is the *sādhaka* because he who chooses the Divine has already been chosen by the Divine, God alone is the *sādhana* because without His Grace the process of integral transformation can neither commence nor continue to the ultimate point of fruition, and the *siddhi* too is God because all the process of becoming moves only towards the power and the glory of His Being and His Purpose in the phenomenal world. And *suddhi*, *siddhi*, *mukti*, *bhūkti* — the ascending series of terms in the Tantra: in

other words, purification, puissance, liberation, enjoyment — these too would seem to have divine origin, divine sustenance, divine sanction and divine participation.

IV

In his own spiritual life, Sri Aurobindo had moved, as we saw in some of the earlier chapters, from one or two unexpected experiences to the tentative period of *prāṇāyāma* and then on to the all-annihilating experience of the silent Brahman at Baroda, under Yogi Lele's guidance. At the Alipur jail, the blissful experience of Narayana Omnipresent had suddenly overwhelmed Sri Aurobindo, and he had won his way to the heart of the *Gita's* integral Yoga; and he had been given a glimpse of the overhead planes of consciousness from Mind to Supermind. At Chandernagore he had likewise explored the nether regions of consciousness too, all the negatives corresponding to and linking with the overhead positives; and at Pondicherry, he had chanced upon the fundamental insights of the Veda and with their help formulated the "ten limbs" of his Supramental Yoga. When Sri Aurobindo started writing *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he was thus in a position to build on the ground of personal experience and take his readers through the unconscious Yoga of Nature, and the various conscious Yogas: Hatha, Raja, Jnana, Karma, Bhakti, the Yoga of the *Gita*, his own integral Yoga and the revolutionary world-transforming Supramental Yoga. With this unique wealth of variegated spiritual experience, it was not unnatural that Sri Aurobindo should weave into the fabric of his Yoga — described with ascending connotation as

Integral Yoga, Purna Yoga or Supramental Yoga — the more essential threads of all the earlier Yogas. The twin streams of Vedanta and Tantra have flowed into Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, but what has made the meeting creative and new is the electric charge of his own sadhana. While the earlier systems of Yogic discipline placed before themselves only the aim of achieving man's salvation as an individual, of reaching the goal of the Spirit and once and for all getting rid of the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, escaping for all eternity from the fatuity and misery of terrestrial life and the interminably involved and meaningless labyrinth of *samsāra*, the aim of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is not only to reach the highest possible levels of the Spirit but also to bring down their Light and Force to our earth-life and make them alone the impulse and the law, the motion and the act, the idea and the actuality, of every segment of our terrestrial life.

Broadly speaking, life on the earth could be lived at three distinct levels of consciousness, the life in the ignorance, the life taught to Arjuna by the Lord of the *Gita*, and the Life Divine visualised by Sri Aurobindo. In ordinary life, humanity is driven by egoistic desire, and the controls are exercised — feebly and fitfully — by an agreed religious ethic or a mental ideal (social, economic or political). The *Gita's* Yoga involves the conquest of egoistic desire and the offering of all work to the Divine, the cultivation of a sense of unity with all creatures flowing from the feeling of oneness with the Divine, the flowering of love and devotion or *bhakti* for the Divine, and the climactic act of *ātma-samarpaṇa* or *prapatti* or total self-surrender to the Lord. In the following passage, Sri Aurobindo differentiates between

the three well-trodden paths of *jñāna*, *bhakti* and *karma*, and shows how they converge in the integral Yoga and rise to a new height of liberation and consummation:

In the Way of Knowledge we may arrive at a point where we can leap out of personality and universe, escape from all thought and will and works and all way of Nature and, absorbed and taken up into Eternity, plunge into the Transcendence; that, though not obligatory on the God-knower, may be the soul's decision.... In the Way of Devotion we may reach, through an intensity of adoration and joy, union with the supreme All-Beloved and remain eternally in the ecstasy of his presence, absorbed in him alone, intimately in one world of bliss with him; that then may be our being's impulsion, its spiritual choice. But in the Way of Works another prospect opens; for traveling on that path, we can enter into liberation and perfection by becoming one law and power of nature with the Eternal; we are identified with him in our will and dynamic self as much as in our spiritual status; a divine way of works is the natural outcome of this union.... In the Integral Yoga these three lines of approach give up their exclusions, meet and coalesce or spring out of each other; liberated from the mind's veil over the self, we live in the Transcendence, enter by the adoration of the heart into the oneness of a supreme love and bliss, and all our forces of being uplifted into the one Force, our will and works surrendered into the one Will and Power, assume the dynamic perfection of the divine Nature.²⁵

²⁵ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 316-7.

Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is also integral like the Yoga of the Gita, but a new dimension — the bringing down of the Supramental Light and Force — is added, and this makes all the difference.

As in individual life, in collective life also there are ascending levels of conduct above the promiscuous play of personal need, preference and desire. There is the sense of the common good of the community, which governs the actions even of animals; there is the reign of a moral code or of a religious ethic; and there is, above all, the divine law inherent in Nature though obscured and held in check by the perversions of human egoism. For mankind the ultimate aim should be the realisation of the dream of Satya Yuga, an order of divine dispensation:

...the sign of the Satya Yuga is that the Law is spontaneous and conscious in each creature and does its own works in a perfect harmony and freedom. Unity and universality, not separative division, would be the foundation of the consciousness of the race; love would be absolute; equality would be consistent with hierarchy and perfect in difference; absolute justice would be secured by the spontaneous action of the being in harmony with the truth of things... right reason, no longer mental but supramental, would be satisfied not by the observation of artificial standards but by the free automatic perception of right relations and their inevitable execution in the act. The quarrel between the individual and society or disastrous struggle between one community and another could not exist; the cosmic consciousness imbedded in our embodied beings would assume a harmonious

diversity in oneness.²⁶

Instead of expecting such an order to be precipitated by a flourish of the wand of the Omnipotent Supreme, it would be for the aspiring and enterprising individual to scale these heights as representative pioneer or pathfinder of the race. And if a group of such pioneers could form themselves into a "mythic society" or a "Deva Sangha", what might not be capable of accomplishment? "A new earth could descend that would be a new heaven, a world of supramental light could be created here amidst the receding darkness of this terrestrial ignorance".²⁷

Such is the ideal, such the possibility. But the question still remains: what is the technique of a world-changing and even Nature-changing Yoga? It cannot take bits of man or society and deal with them in different ways, or deal only with one or some of them, leaving the rest severely alone. And as for the sadhana, there is but one sadhana though with varying intensities of application:

...there is only one sadhana for all parts, not a separate mental sadhana, vital sadhana or physical sadhana — but the action of the sadhana is applied sometimes separately to each part, sometimes on the contrary the action is the mental and vital together, or vital and physical together, or all three together. But it is the same sadhana always.²⁸

Poetic composition, whether one is engaged in writing a *haikku*, a sonnet, an elegy, an Aeschylean tragedy, a play like *Hamlet* or *Faust*, or a stupendous epic like the *Mahabharata*, poses the same basic problem of para-

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 236. ²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁸ *On Yoga II*, Tome Two, p. 523.

deigmatic expression and effective communication, yet the poetic technique involved cannot be the same everywhere. So too with the older Yogas and Sri Aurobindo's integral and supramental Yoga:

If you take the poem simile, it is the Mahabharata of a Mahabharata that has to be done.

And what, compared with the limited Greek perfection, is the technique of the Mahabharata?²⁹

The technique has accordingly to be "multiform, sinuous, patient, all-including as the world itself", and one has to be ready to face unexpected variables and possibilities:

The spiritual life is not a thing that can be formulated in a rigid definition or bound by a fixed mental rule; it is a vast field of evolution, an immense kingdom potentially larger than the other kingdoms below it, with a hundred provinces, a thousand types, stages, forms, paths, variations of the spiritual ideal, degrees of spiritual advancement.³⁰

In *The Synthesis of Yoga* we see how the essence and methods of the older Yogas are taken up in the inclusive and integral Yoga of Self-Perfection, and hints are also scattered regarding the supramental Yoga. In his letters, Sri Aurobindo went a little further, but even there everything could not be developed "systematically" or schematically, and Sri Aurobindo once confided to a correspondent: "The detail or method of the later stages of the Yoga, which go into little known or untrodden regions, I have not made public and I do not at present intend to do so".³¹

Although there could be nothing like an altogether

²⁹ *ibid.*, Tome One, p. 15. ³⁰ *ibid.*, Tome Two, p. 739.

³¹ *ibid.*, Tome One, pp. 106-7.

“new” Yoga and although some integrality could be claimed for the Gita’s Yoga, for some of the Tantra siddhis and for the way of life taught by men of God like Ramanuja and Nanak, it wouldn’t be right to minimise the revolutionary newness and integrality of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga. It professedly aims at taking up all sides of the Truth—for example, Veda and Vedanta providing the core of the spiritual philosophy of *The Life Divine* and of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and the Tantric process of the waking up of the Kundalini to pass through the purified centres suggesting the ascending and descending stair of consciousness that is basic to Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga—but there is no mechanical joining or dovetailing. With regard to the “newness” of his Yoga, Sri Aurobindo has said:

- (i) its central aim is the radical change or transformation of life, and “ascent” to the higher consciousness is to be the means of bringing down the power of that consciousness to effect the divinisation of life;
- (ii) its aim is not an individual achievement for the individual’s sake, but as preparatory to a larger achievement, comprising all humanity and Nature;
- (iii) its aim is to bring down the hitherto unrecognised or unmobilised power of supramental consciousness and to make it act directly in human and terrestrial existence;
- (iv) in its method, it is “as total and integral as the aim set before it, viz., the total and integral change of the consciousness and nature... not a re-treading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure”.³²

³² *ibid.*, Tome One, p. 108

In a field of experience such as the "spiritual" that is apparently so nebulous and so easy to get confused about, it is necessary to avoid entanglement in the coils of self-delusion. To what extent is Yoga "scientific"? Are its processes and experiences controllable, measurable, comparable and repeatable? Sri Aurobindo's answer is guarded and undogmatic, and that is partly the reason why it carries persuasion the more convincingly:

...ultimate truth even on the physical plane seems to recede as Science advances. Science started on the assumption that the ultimate truth must be physical and objective — and the objective Ultimate (or even less than that) would explain all subjective phenomena. Yoga proceeds on the opposite view that the ultimate Truth is spiritual and subjective and it is in that ultimate Light that we must view objective phenomena....

Yoga, however, is scientific to this extent that it proceeds by subjective experiment and bases all its findings on experience; mental intuitions are admitted only as a first step... they must be confirmed by being translated into and justified by experience. ...It is a fact that Yogic experience runs everywhere on the same lines. Certainly, there are, not one line, but many; for, admittedly, we are dealing with a many-sided Infinite....³³

Mystics of ancient, mediaeval and modern times have made similar affirmations about their encounters with Reality; and Hindu, Christian and Islamic ecstasies have borne almost identical witness to the one blissful Existent. Verily intuitions are universal in essence, although our intellectual formulations and interpretations may be

³³ *ibid.*, p. 206.

different. The experiences of Yoga take place in an inner and not in the outer physical domain, and follow laws and submit to criteria of evaluation other than those of the physical sciences. Sri Aurobindo adds:

Just as scientific enquiry passes beyond that of the physical sciences and enters the domain of the infinitesimal about which the senses can say nothing—for one cannot see and touch an electron or know by the evidence of the sense-mind whether it exists or not or decide by that evidence whether the earth really turns round the sun and not the sun round the earth as our senses and all our physical experience daily tell us—so the spiritual search passes beyond the domain of scientific or rational enquiry and it is impossible by the aid of the ordinary positive reason to test the data of spiritual experience and decide whether those things exist or not or what is their law and nature. As in Science, so here you have to accumulate experience, follow faithfully the methods laid down by the Guru or by the systems of the past, you have to develop an intuitive discrimination which compares the experiences, see what they mean, how far and in what field each is valid, what is the place of each in the whole, how it can be reconciled or related with others that at first might seem to contradict it, etc., etc., until you can move with a secure knowledge in the vast field of spiritual phenomena.³⁴

The practical results of the harnessing of nuclear power may become available to all, but the mathematics, science and technology of nuclear fission and nuclear power-generation can be understood only by savants or

³⁴ *ibid.*, Tome One, pp. 206-7.

super-technicians in the respective fields. Likewise it is only the initiates in spirituality that can properly determine the precise value of particular experiences. This is the reason why Sri Aurobindo had to maintain a continuous correspondence going into the minutest details of spiritual life with his disciples during the first great period of the Ashram's expansion and consolidation (1929-38); and throughout its history Sri Aurobindo or the Mother have been supervising and guiding — directly or indirectly — the inner life of their disciples. In their writings, too, they give abundant evidence of the fact that they were fully acquainted with the latest researches in science and psychology. They had themselves been intellectuals "insistent on practical results more than any Russell can be"; but their own spiritual experiences and realisations — which corroborated one another's — had facilitated the passage across the sea of philosophic doubt and safe landing on the shores of Faith. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to one of his disciples forty years ago:

We know well what is the difference between a subjective experience and a dynamic outward-going and realising force. So although we have faith (and who ever did anything great in the world without having faith in his mission or the Truth at work behind him?), we do not found ourselves on faith alone, but on a great ground of knowledge which we have been developing and testing all our lives. I think I can say that I have been testing day and night for years upon years more scrupulously than any scientist his theory or his method on the physical plane.³⁵

³⁵ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 377-8.

V

“Yoga-siddhi”, says Sri Aurobindo, “the perfection that comes from the practice of Yoga, can be best attained by the combined working of four great instruments”.³⁶ These are *śāstra*, *utsāha*, *guru* and *kāla*. *Śāstra* is the body of knowledge — scripture, hymn (*stotra*), *mantra* — that helps the progress of the sadhana. But Sri Aurobindo remarks that for the Sadhaka of the integral Yoga no written Shastra can be all-sufficient, for even the greatest scripture could have a constricting effect on the free spirit of aspiring man:

The supreme Shastra of the integral Yoga is the eternal Veda secret in the heart of every thinking and living being. The lotus of the eternal knowledge and the eternal perfection is a bud closed and folded up within us. It opens swiftly or gradually, petal by petal, through successive realisations, once the mind of man turns towards the Eternal, once his heart, no longer compressed and confined by attachment to finite appearances, becomes enamoured, in whatever degree, of the Infinite.³⁷

And the man who is “enamoured” of the Infinite is also beloved of the Infinite. In fact, the aspirant is already the Infinite in his secret and veiled nature, and Yoga has merely to change this inner fact into an open and conscious and dynamic reality: “All teaching is a self-revealing, all becoming is an unfolding. Self-attainment is the secret; self-knowledge and an increasing consciousness are the means and the process”.³⁸

The supreme Guru or teacher for the sadhaka of integral Yoga is likewise the Master “within us”. An

³⁶ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 59. ³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 59. ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 60.

external Guru — a messiah like Krishna or Christ or Muhammad — is no doubt helpful in the earlier stages of the Yoga, but the sadhaka should shun sectarianism, he should avoid the egoism and arrogance that cry “My God, my Incarnation, my Prophet, my Guru!” The sadhaka would be wise to see in his *iṣṭa devatā* all other names and forms of the Deity as well, to see in the one supreme Divine all the godheads and their *avatāras* and manifestations. And while he might gratefully receive whatever is vouchsafed by a human Guru, the sadhaka’s ultimate dependence should be on the sovereign inner guide alone:

It is he who destroys our darkness by the resplendent light of his knowledge; that light becomes within us the increasing glory of his own self-revelation. He discloses progressively in us his own nature of freedom, bliss, love, power, immortal being.... By the inpouring of his own influence and presence into us, he enables the individual being to attain to identity with the universal and transcendent.³⁹

To be able to read the veiled eternal Shastra and to be able to awaken and to hearken to the Jagad-Guru or World-Teacher secret within us, what is needed is *utsāha* or unswerving aspiration and sustained personal effort; and, of course, *kāla*, for the auspicious instrumentality of Time must favour us too.

Utsāha or *śraddhā* or flaming aspiration gives the “decisive turn” that the sadhaka needs to propel his life in a new direction, as when — to cite a classic instance — Gautama Siddharta suddenly decided to leave his wife and son, and go in search of the Truth. There comes a

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 68.

moment when the scales fall, the soap-bubble illusions crash, the pulls of our sheerly earth-nature snap, and the sadhaka looks at the phenomenal world with a new understanding and learns to look within, finding his way to the mystic cave of his true soul to live from there outward, governing henceforth his outer life by the inner light and force. It is the intensity of this turning, the sureness of the inner opening and the purity and fullness of the inner life that will determine the progress in the sadhana:

The power of aspiration of the heart, the force of the will, the concentration of the mind, the perseverance and determination of the applied energy are the measure of that intensity. The ideal sadhaka should be able to say in the Biblical phrase, "My zeal for the Lord has eaten me up". It is this zeal for the Lord, *utsāha*... that devours the ego and breaks up the limitations of its petty and narrow mould for the full and wide reception of that which it seeks, that which, being universal exceeds and, being transcendent, surpasses even the largest and highest individual self and nature.⁴⁰

The "personal effort" required is described more concretely and with much greater particularity in *The Mother* which Sri Aurobindo wrote almost immediately after going into retirement in 1926:

The personal effort required is a triple labour of aspiration, rejection and surrender, —

an aspiration vigilant, constant, unceasing — the mind's will, the heart's seeking, the assent of the vital being, the will to open and make plastic the physical consciousness and nature;

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 65.

rejection of the movements of the lower nature — rejection of the mind's ideas, opinions, preferences, habits, constructions, so that the true knowledge may find free room in a silent mind, — rejection of the vital nature's desires, demands, cravings, sensations, passions, selfishness, pride, arrogance, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, hostility to the Truth, so that the true power and joy may pour from above into a calm, large, strong and consecrated vital being, — rejection of the physical nature's stupidity, doubt, disbelief, obscurity, obstinacy, pettiness, laziness, unwillingness to change, *tamas*, so that the true stability of Light, Power, Ananda may establish itself in a body growing always more divine;

surrender of oneself and all one is and has and every plane of the consciousness and every movement to the Divine and the Shakti.⁴¹

At first, the Word, the Guru, and even the zeal may apparently have an outside origin; but the external Shastra and Guru only give a start to the catalytic cracking action and kindle the flame within. "The greatest Master", says Sri Aurobindo, "is much less a Teacher than a Presence pouring the divine consciousness and its constituting light and power and purity and bliss into all who are receptive around him".⁴² In a Yoga that is so unstereotyped and multiform as Sri Aurobindo's, the Word and the Guru — the Guru and his Word — have their essential effective role, for without them there may be risk of serious stumbling and grievous error, at

⁴¹ *The Mother* (1940 Impression), pp. 11-3.

⁴² *The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 75-6.

least in the crucial earlier stages. For the disciple, then, the Master, his Word, his influence are an insurance of success in the Yoga. But it is equally true that not until Shastra and Guru are unveiled or installed within can the process of Yoga really make headway. Even Time, usually viewed as an impediment, becomes servant and instrument when Shastra, Utsaha and Guru chime to significant purpose and light up the flame of aspiration within.

Sri Aurobindo begins *The Mother* with this superb seminal statement about the dialectic of the Yoga:

There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing which is the aim of our endeavour, a fixed and unfailing aspiration that calls from below and a supreme Grace from above that answers.

The call from below, the steady aspiration, the constant striving, the total surrender to the Lord within, the slow ascent of consciousness, all are meant to invite an answering response from above or the sanction and Grace of the Supreme. And between the call and the sanction there is only the Mother, the Shakti with her many powers and personalities — Mother-Wisdom, Mother-Might, Mother-Beauty, Mother-Love, Mother-Perfection — and it is the Mother who mediates between the ego and God, between life in ignorance and division and misery and life in knowledge and harmony and *ānanda*:

If you desire this transformation, put yourself in the hands of the Mother and her Powers without cavil or resistance and let her do unhindered her work within you.... Follow your soul and not your mind, your soul that answers to the Truth, not your mind that leaps at appearances; trust the

Divine Power and she will free the godlike elements in you and shape all into an expression of Divine Nature.⁴³

While in the language of Yoga, the key role is thus given to Shakti or the Divine Mother, in the language of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy a like role is given to the Supermind. It is the coming or the bringing down of the Supermind that is destined to effect the desired total integral transformation of our earth-nature and create the conditions under which the Life Divine can take root and endure. Sri Aurobindo, however, makes it clear that supramental change is only the ultimate, not the next-door, stage; "it must be regarded as the end of a long vista".⁴⁴ An arduous journey of self-conquest and self-exceeding and many steps of self-evolution must precede before the goal of supramental change may be sighted. The decisive turn, the triple effort of aspiration, rejection and surrender, the awakening to the veiled psychic entity within, the discovery of its filiations with the psychic selves of all others, the spiritualisation of the being by a descent of the higher powers of Light, Purity, Knowledge, Freedom, Wideness, the destruction of the ego and all separative identifications and formulations — these must precede the call to the Supreme and the descent of the Supermind. What may then happen is for us mere speculation, but for Sri Aurobindo himself, who had grown native to the supramental state, it was something seen, heard, felt, experienced, and this is the reason why his description is so compellingly vivid and carries with it the promise of certain realisation in the not very distant future:

...when we rise from mind to supermind, the new

⁴³ *The Mother*, pp. 75, 83. ⁴⁴ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 321.

power of consciousness does not reject, but uplifts, enlarges and transfigures the operations of our soul and mind and life....

...The Supermind acting through sense feels all as God and in God, all as the manifested touch, sight, hearing, taste, perfume, all as the felt, seen, directly experienced substance and power and energy and movement, play, penetration, vibration, form, nearness, pressure, substantial interchange of the Infinite. Nothing exists independently to its sense, but all is felt as one being and movement and each thing as indivisible from the rest and as having in it all the Infinite, all the Divine....

...the eye gets a new and transfigured vision of things and of the world around us.... There is at the same time a subtle change which makes the sight see a sort of fourth dimension, the character of which is a certain internality...

...Nothing will be really external to it, for it will experience all in the unity of the cosmic consciousness which will be its own.... It will experience matter, not only gross matter but the subtle and the most subtle, as substance and form of the spirit, experience life and all kinds of energy as the dynamics of the spirit, supramentalised mind as a means or channel of knowledge of the spirit, supermind as the infinite self of knowledge and power of knowledge and Ananda of knowledge of the spirit.⁴⁵

The dream or the ideal is not simply "a healthy mind in a healthy body"; it is a divine life in a divine body.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 960, 989, 992-3, 1010-1.

⁴⁶ *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 35.

The spiritual summit and the material base are to come together. This man-changing, world-changing, Nature-changing Yoga aims thus at establishing nothing less than an Earthly Paradise, for not otherwise can the present crisis in evolution be decisively solved. And the Word is given, and Savitri and Satyavan are to be enabled to inaugurate the supramental age:

The incarnate dual Power shall open God's door,
Eternal supermind touch earthly Time.
The superman shall wake in mortal man
And manifest the hidden demi-god...
All then shall change, a magic order come
Overtopping this mechanical universe...
A divine harmony shall be earth's law,
Beauty and Joy remould her way to life:
Even the body shall remember God.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Savitri*, pp. 792-4.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE YOGA AND THE ASHRAM

I

It is characteristic of man's double nature that he wants both to cultivate the private garden of his personality and to lose himself in a larger collectivity. At one moment he dares to be all alone, but at other times he is eager to mingle and merge his individual identity in his family, his tribe, his caste, his guild, his nation; or he joins a club, or a professional society, or even a political party. And sometimes individual man is athirst for certainty in the realm of ends and means, he is drawn to the Infinite, he is teased by thoughts of Eternity. Everything — personal ambition, family fortunes, national welfare — pale into insignificance in the context of this passion for knowledge of the "first and last" things, and in his perplexity he may seek a Guru or a spiritual Guide. When many such seekers gather round a Guru, an Ashram — whether or not it is called by that name — comes into existence as the practical answer to this persistent human need. An Ashram, then, is a place — a house or group of houses — where the disciples of a Guru foregather to live the life of the Spirit. The soul of an Ashram is the Guru with a particular vision of Reality and his own tested pathway to the Goal. And since different disciples may come to the Guru from widely different backgrounds, he will deal with each in a manner appropriate to him alone. But of course there must be some wide base of shared faith among the disciples and a feeling of reverence for the Guru. The

spiritual life implies an impulse towards the illimitable, the immaculate, the perfect. The pull is always from the narrow, the selfish, the egoistic, the temporal to the horizons of the higher knowledge, leading to unselfish action and stainless bliss.

Ashrams have flourished in India since prehistoric times. The Rishis of the Vedic and Upanishadic ages had their own Ashrams where princes and commoners alike received training in the arts and sciences as well as spiritual instruction. Krishna and Balarama and Kuchela were fellow-pupils at Rishi Sandipani's Ashram on the banks of the Jumna. It was only in later ages that Ashrams became excessively austere, a refuge for people who were fed up with the weary weight of this oppressive world. There was also the assumption that the phenomenal world was mere illusion, and the pursuit of the Self — or Nirvana — was the only wise course for the spiritual aspirant. But once again, there has been witnessed in our own time a return to the older type of Ashram that trained people for here and now, and not only for the hereafter. In their different ways, Gurudev Tagore at Shantiniketan, Gandhiji at Sabarmati and Shevagram, and in many of the Ramakrishna Mission centres, the challenges of everyday life were not ignored, although the Divine Presence was always assumed and Divine Protection was always hoped for.

The Ashram principle is also behind the age-old concept of *guru-kula-vāsa*, or learning by living with the Guru. Whether one desires initiation into spiritual philosophy or into the mystic folds of music or into the mystery of any of the arts and sciences, the best way of achieving mastery was to live with the Guru, to observe him, serve him and obey him, though not in fear but in

love and complete trust. Caste, status, religion, even sex is irrelevant; the unique personal relationship is alone the essence of the matter, and the links between Guru and Disciple are forged in the fire and on the anvil of spirituality and not by means of sectarian imperatives or in terms of financial incentives. Even in the West, the greatest results in scientific research are obtained only by brilliant young men and women who expose themselves continually to the direct influence of savants in the respective fields. Nobel laureates breed other Nobel laureates, and there have been whole genealogies of Nobel laureates. Himself a Nobel laureate, H. A. Krebs has illustrated this point by a reference to the von Baeyer family: tracing his own descent from Berthollet, Gay-Lussac, Liebig and Kekule, in the course of five or six generations von Baeyer and his scientific descendents seem to have accounted for nearly twenty Nobel laureates. There is thus a whole Guru-Sishya linked sequence which is as significant in the secular arts and sciences as it certainly is in the art and science of spiritual philosophy. The sense of the Divine Presence and the feeling of Divine Guidance and Divine Protection are, however, the indispensable *élan* in all Gurukulas and Ashrams.

When young men were first drawn to Sri Aurobindo — at Baroda, and later at Calcutta — it was because he was the apostle of Nationalism and the high-priest of the revolutionary movement. There was, of course, from the first a visionary look in his eyes, which struck everyone; they could hardly help whispering, "Did you look at his eyes?" After the experience of the silent Brahman in January 1908, he seemed to move about like one almost in a trance of transcendence, and his political activities — writing, speeches, campaigning — seemed to



take place on the surface consciousness, leaving the inner calm wholly unruffled. The year of incarceration at the Alipur jail, as we saw earlier, was really a session of sadhana and when, after his acquittal in May 1909, he launched the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma* and made his astonishing speech at Uttarpara, it was clear to all that Sri Aurobindo was now a man of God and only incidentally a political leader. He had not forgotten the continuing fact of India's political subjection, but he felt he shouldn't act except from a ground of total competence; and, besides, he now began to see the Indian problem as part of a larger problem — the human condition everywhere. Presently the unmistakable *âdes* or divine command came to him in February 1910, and he went to Chandernagore, and from there, in April, to Pondicherry. He had firmly decided to sever his connection with politics and to devote himself entirely to sadhana.

Notwithstanding the bleak outer circumstances in Pondicherry, the sadhana went on satisfactorily, and a little over a year after his arrival there, Sri Aurobindo wrote in the course of a letter dated 12 July 1911:

I need some place of refuge in which I can complete my Yoga unassailed and build up other souls around me. It seems to me that Pondicherry is the place appointed....

I am developing the necessary powers for bringing down the spiritual on the material plane, and I am now able to put myself into men and change them, removing the darkness and bringing light, giving them a new heart and a new mind. This I can do with great swiftness and completeness with those who are near me, but I have also succeeded with men hundreds of miles away. I have also been given

the power to read men's characters and hearts, even their thoughts, but this power is not yet absolutely complete, nor can I use it always and in all cases....

...the principal object of my Yoga is to remove absolutely and entirely every possible source of error and ineffectiveness, of error in order that the Truth I shall eventually show to men may be perfect, and of ineffectiveness in order that the work of changing the world, so far as I have to assist it, may be entirely victorious and irresistible.... I have been kept busy laying down the foundation, a work severe and painful. It is only now that the edifice is beginning to rise upon the sure and perfect foundation that has been laid.¹

Two months later, he wrote again:

My Yoga is proceeding with great rapidity, but I defer writing to you of the results until certain experiments in which I am now engaged have yielded fruit sufficient to establish beyond dispute the theory and system of Yoga which I have formed and which is giving great results, not only to me, but to the young men who are with me.... I expect these results within a month, if all goes well.²

From these two letters we may infer that (1) Sri Aurobindo looked upon Pondicherry as the divinely appointed place to do sadhana and build up other souls around him; (2) that, as early as 1911, he was developing the necessary powers to bring down the spiritual to the material plane (no reference here to the Supermind); (3) he had had some success in influencing by power of the spirit the men around him, and even some who were at some considerable distance; (4) he was experi-

¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 773-4. ² *ibid.*, pp. 774-5.

menting in the spiritual field with a view to finalising his theory and system of Yoga; and (5) his aim in all this was to change the world (not merely to win India's independence).

During the early years at Pondicherry there was the group of young men — Nolini, Bejoy, Moni, Saurin, Va Ra — living with Sri Aurobindo, and friends like Bharati, Aiyar and Srinivasachari visited him frequently. There were language lessons, there were discussions on poetry and politics, and there were readings in the Veda. It was in all but name an Ashram already, and the soul of the Ashram was Sri Aurobindo. First the idea was that the sadhana might take only about six months, then a year passed, then four years. Then the Richards came, and the *Arya* was launched, for by now he had the clue to the entire Truth which he could now set forth in *The Life Divine* and other major treatises. When after the outbreak of the first world war Mirra returned to France. Sri Aurobindo wrote on 20 May 1915 that the aim of their Yoga should be to make "Heaven and Earth equal and one". In September 1916, Saurin opened the 'Aryan Stores' with capital advanced by the Mother, but the concern had to be sold in 1920 when he went away to Bengal. In the meantime the war continued, and the *Arya* continued; and when the war ended, the Mother came finally on 24 April 1920. Amrita and Barin were also of the group, and it became a more cohesive, a better organised, group after 24 November 1920. When the *Arya* was suspended in 1921, the group began to look more inward than ever. Not long after, Sri Aurobindo dissociated himself from Motilal Roy and his Pravarthak Sangh at Chandernagore. By 1 January 1922, the Ashram — although not blazoned as such — was very

much of a reality in its inner spiritual orientation and organised outer communal living. Between 1922 and 1926, some more joined the Ashram, there was regular group meditation, there were talks by Sri Aurobindo and evening discussions in which he took an active part, and the Mother gradually took an increasing measure of responsibility for the management of the Ashram household and the spiritual welfare of the sadhaks. First a few started meditating with her, and soon more joined, and the trend was clear in the early months of 1926, and especially after 15 August, culminating at last in the "siddhi day" of 24 November and Sri Aurobindo's complete withdrawal. And yet it was not really a "withdrawal", and it was no setback for the Ashram either. As Barin wrote later in *Khulnabasi*:

The Yogic power of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo opened wide the doors of the unostentatious Ashram, so long in the grip of want and difficulty, to the steady inflow of sufficiency and prosperity. Spontaneous offerings came from disciples and admirers. The most ordinary men found in themselves an outflowing of the poetic power, a wonderful talent for painting, a capacity for meditation, occult vision and skilfulness of work. Day by day the Pondicherry Ashram grew into a Yogic place of pilgrimage for the entire world. An aspirant had a vision: the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were inside a golden tabernacle on the top of a luminous hill, and men from different climes from all directions thronged to the place in endless streams. Today his vision has materialised.³

It has, indeed.

³ Reprinted in *Mother India* (February 1964) and quoted in Narayna

II

From about 25 in 1926, the number of sadhakas went up to 36 by the end of the next year, and to 80 in 1928. Dhyuman, who had come earlier in 1924, joined the Ashram permanently in 1927. Dilip came, apparently for good, in November 1928. His intellectual admiration for Bertrand Russell infected him with philosophic doubt, while his adhesion to Sri Aurobindo opened up vistas of enchanting spiritual progress. The inner conflict was not easily solved, and once Krishnaprem had to give this friendly reprimand:

Why do you keep harping on Russell?... why do you keep hoping that your Gurudev or someone else will answer his sceptical arguments? If you accept Russell's premisses you will be forced into his conclusions, but then why accept his premisses? He is no muddle-headed thinker whose conclusions are at fault with his premisses.... If you set foot on an escalator, you will be automatically carried to the top of it; so why set foot on it at all when you see it going in the wrong direction?¹

Even before Dilip came in 1928, Datta (Miss Hodgson) was there and so was Pavitra, formerly P. B. St.-Hilaire, who had seen service as a Captain of the French Army during the world war. Another arrival was the young Englishman, J. A. Chadwick, a brilliant Cambridge mathematical philosopher who had come to India, ostensibly to take up a professorship in a university, but really to seek the Truth beyond both mathematics and philosophy. In Sri Aurobindo he found the destined Guru, and in

Prasad's *Life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram* (1965), pp. 176-7.

¹ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 38.

the Ashram his haven of peace. For about ten years he was in the Ashram breathing the free air of the Spirit and pursuing his sadhana unremittingly. Dilip records a revealing conversation between Arjava (the name Sri Aurobindo had given to Chadwick) and a visiting sceptic (nicknamed Mr. Pontiff):

Mr. Pontiff. I will ask you a simple question: What on earth are you doing? — And, please don't stall....

Chadwick. Suppose I said: each of us here has to come to grips with his ego?

Mr. Pontiff. And when he wins?

Chadwick. The Kingdom of Heaven begins — for him, at all events.

Mr. Pontiff. But for the rest of us?

Chadwick. Why not "wait and see"...

Mr. Pontiff.... I have not come all this way just to pick holes in your Master's way of doing things. I admire him because he professes to believe in our terrestrial evolution.... I would be the last person to say that the East has nothing to teach us. But then her prophets must become a little more dynamic and come *out* to give it instead of staying immured in their ivory towers of peace and meditation and self-conquest....

Chadwick.... You firmly believe (don't you) that the world can only be bettered if and when its best spirits work outside on a vocal platform and not, like the silent Orientals, in peaceful Ashrams?

Mr. Pontiff. That's right.

The best minds of the West had worked, at least since the rise of modern science and industrialism, on the noisy platform of activism, not committing the mis-

take of the Orientals; and yet, asked Chadwick, wasn't Western civilisation already on the downward curve? Could the rose of Western civilisation bloom so long as mankind didn't know how to settle its score once and for all with the deadening canker that was eating into its core?

Mr. Pontiff. And suppose I asked you — what is that canker?

Chadwick. Suppose I told you it's made up of divers "isms" presided over by your fanatic itch to rush about doing something convincing when you are far from convinced yourselves about the rightness of your vision or the correctness of your method? Yes, I do claim one has to win the right vision first before one can find a clue to the right action.⁵

This sadhana of coming to grips with the ego and gaining the right vision into the innermost truth of things turned Arjava — as if by accident, or as though a spring had been released — into a poet of distinction and originality. The collected volume of his *Poems* includes over 300 of the pieces written during 1931-8. Not only what Krishnaprem has called "the delicate dream-like beauty of these poems", but even more their panoramic interior landscape of the Spirit, must set this body of poetry apart, a singular example of what Yoga could do to awaken the poetic Kundalini in the sadhak. Having early won his way to what he had sought —

This was the country that I did not know,

The joy that has no shadow-throw,

A lore which worldings worthless deem,

That love our thrall'd hearts fear to show,

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 84-6.

That power no helmèd hosts bestow

— Of freedomed soul the source and stream⁶ —

having basked in the Red Lotus of Sri Aurobindo's consciousness and having received the four-fold Grace of emerald, topaz, amethyst and ruby from the Shakti of God, Arjava reached his journey's end at the age of forty, a "burning blade" for ever.⁷

An intellectual like Chadwick, K. D. Sethna too was early drawn to Yoga. By the merest accident he heard about Sri Aurobindo and read about the Ashram, and now told himself: "I am going there!... I have found my goal — or at least the path to my goal".⁸ He was then twenty-three, and he made the trip to Pondicherry without much delay, arriving there in December 1927. His first darshan was on 21 February 1928:

I saw him sitting very grandly, with an acquiline nose and smallish eyes, and moustaches and a beard.... I was examining him thoroughly. At length I made my pranam. He put both his hands on my head — that was his way — a most delightful way, with his very soft hands. I took my leave, looking at him again.... I observed to myself: "Quite an impressive Guru!"

The "rebirth" in the Ashram was really the awakening to the "sweetness and light" of the psychic being within. It was actually an "open book" — once one was able to fix one's gaze on it:

...the sweetness in the experience is of a bliss which has no cause; a self-existent bliss is there. It is not dependent on persons, occasions, circumstances, objects. To be there, deep within, to feel

⁶ *Poems* (1939), p. 45. ⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 177, 334-5.

⁸ *Mother India* (October 1970), p. 560. ⁹ *ibid.*, p. 563.

oneself there is to be perennially, and I might even say unbearably, happy. The light also is present, because some kind of natural truth-feeling is experienced, which guides you all the time.... On the negative side... one is not depressed, one does not bewail one's lot any more; secondly, one does not rebel, either against the Divine or against human beings.¹⁰

He now acquired a new name too, 'Amalkiran' ('A clear ray'), often shortened to 'Amal'; and he promptly started a correspondence with Sri Aurobindo, innumerable letters passing to and fro covering a variety of subjects, and especially poetry — Sethna's, Sri Aurobindo's and other people's poetry. Ever since his first coming to Pondicherry over forty years ago, Sethna has been a committed and dedicated and evangelistic Aurobindonian, and he is also the best informed, the most perceptive and the most illuminating of the critics of Sri Aurobindo's poetry.

Another staunch Aurobindonian, Rishabhchand, joined the Ashram in February 1931. He had suspended his studies in college during Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement, and had then started the firm 'India Silk House' at Calcutta; but finding the lure of Yoga irresistible, he had shaken off the cares of family and business and boarded the "celestial omnibus" to Pondicherry. Once there, he never left it: a demure, scholarly, self-possessed person, he was utterly devoted to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, he used to give readings from Sri Aurobindo's poetry and *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and he wrote authoritatively on the sadhana. The sense of consecration to the Divine blotted out all else from

¹⁰ *ibid.*, (December 1970), p. 655.

his memory, and for almost forty years he lived in the Ashram as the embodiment of surrender to the Divine.

From beyond the shores of India came Miss Margaret Woodrow Wilson, daughter of the wartime American President. She had read Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* in the New York Public Library in the late nineteen twenties, and that effected the "decisive turn" in her life. She first acquired the habit of inward concentration, and learned to open herself to the psychic and the spiritual, and at last she was permitted to make the "passage to India" and join the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo gave her the name 'Nishta' ("one-pointed, fixed and steady concentration, devotion and faith in the single aim—the Divine and the Divine Realisation"), and it fitted her perfectly. Of Sri Aurobindo she said: "Here is one on earth whom one can love all one's life and in whom one can lose oneself". She willingly made typed copies of *The Life Divine* when the revised book was being got ready for the press. When she read *The Ideal of Human Unity* (she made a typed draft of this book as well), she wondered how it was that people like her father and herself hadn't seen things so clearly as Sri Aurobindo had from a corner of India.¹¹ Her sadhana was single-minded, and even when she fell ill, she declined to return to the States, remarking: "There they may take care of my body, but who will take care of my soul?"

And so they came, and most of them remained. Nirodbaran, for example, after a brilliant medical education in Edinburgh, returned to Bengal, and then made a bee-line to Pondicherry. Reminiscing about his discipleship to Sri Aurobindo, Nirod says:

¹¹ *Mother India* (March 1971), p. 108 (the reference occurs in a reported speech by Surendra Mohan Ghosh).

A medical man, materialist by education, I cared very little for God and had no faith. I started the sadhana without having any idea about it, as Stendhal's Fabrice joined the army in utter ignorance of what war was like. And out of this raw and sceptical fellow Sri Aurobindo has made a fighter for the Divine.¹²

Like Arjava's, the bud of Nirod's psychic self too opened more and more as it warmed up in the sunshine of his Guru's Grace:

My intellectual preparation glided insensibly into creative activity. I wanted to be a poet. I had started writing in Bengali, then in English.... Sri Aurobindo said that in the Ashram atmosphere a creative force was in action.... Every day he not only sent me inspiration but corrected my poems, gave concrete suggestions, explained the meaning of the poems which I composed without understanding what I meant. Strangely enough in both Bengali and English I wrote, medium-like, many such poems, some of which Sri Aurobindo called surrealist-mystic...always his letters, persuasive like the wind, pushed me on till one day he cried out, "The poet is born. What about the Yogi?"¹³

Like his own "Lonely Tramp", he has since walked on, sustained by his dauntless faith:

My feet shall never rest nor tire
Until, my destined journey done,
I stand, led by the inscrutable fire,
Before the seat of the lonely One.¹⁴

Like Dilip and Amal, Nirod also corresponded with Sri

¹² *Mother India* (February 1967), p. 32.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 35. ¹⁴ *Sun-Blossoms* (1947), p. 56.

Aurobindo a good deal from 1934 onwards, and as a physician he had privileges that others lacked, for even when correspondence had to be suspended during the *darśan* rush-time, Nirod was permitted to make an exception of himself. "Correspondence suspended", Sri Aurobindo wrote once (February 1935), "and resumable only on notice. But under cover of your medical cloak, you can carry on. Only mum about it!"¹⁵ What human language can Nirod find for all that generous understanding and all that lavish downpour of Grace?

And Prithwi Singh came, he remained; notwithstanding his poor eyesight, he typed more than one draft of *The Life Divine* in the later nineteen-thirties, and he also prepared the complete analytical index which later appeared in the American edition. And Nishikanto — a poet of distinction in Bengali — came and stayed on. And Bhishmadev the musician came. And Sisirkumar Mitra came from Shantiniketan, and has never looked back. Historian and educationist and Yogi, Sisir Mitra has been among the friendliest and most helpful of the Ashram community.

And thus as the years passed the Ashram has waxed in strength of numbers and widening influence. Men and women have come from all over India — and some from outside as well: from France, Germany, England, USA, Africa — and the sadhaks have had different religious backgrounds, and are drawn from a variety of professions. Narayan Prasad, Premanand, Punjalal, Shankaragauda, Chandradip, Gangadharam — to name a few — were among the familiar figures in the Ashram in the early forties. The aeronautical engineer, Pinto, joined the Ashram and secured the name 'Udar', and has set up

¹⁵ *Mother India* (July 1970), p. 348.

workshops and industries there. Madhav Pandit came in 1939 in the wake of his teacher, T. V. Kapali Sastry, and has been there since. A Sanskritist like Sastry, Madhav's consecration to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is as unflinching as it is unblemished. "Just as the Master Flutist of the Mahabharata attracted the choicest souls to his feet for his great work and master plan", says one writer, "so also Sri Aurobindo, the Master of the Supramental Age, has drawn this choicest instrument (Madhav Pandit) for his divine work and master plan".¹⁶ With his calm unhurried demeanour and taut strength tuned to the Divine, Madhav has been one of the principal, if unobtrusive, power-houses in the Ashram.

Not all the sadhaks, however, have been permanent inmates of the Ashram. Some like Sir Akbar Hydari usually came only for the darshans. Others stayed for periods short or long and went away. There was S. Doraiswami Aiyar, a Nationalist and leading Madras advocate, who gave up his lucrative practice to do sadhana in the Ashram, and he was there for several years. Distinguished in appearance, he wore the air of a man with a divine appointment to keep and was in readiness always. Another lawyer, Syed Mehdi Imam of Patna, educated almost wholly in England like Sri Aurobindo, was also drawn to him and the Mother, lived in the Ashram for years, and has written perceptively on Shakespeare's plays and on *Savitri*. And there was the ochre-robed Yogi Suddhananda Bharati, a prolific writer and poet in Tamil, whose austere looks and leonine movements made an unforgettable impression on the visitor. Professors of

¹⁶ N. Subbunarayanan in *M. P. Pandit 50th Birthday Commemoration Volume*, 1968, p. 12.

philosophy like S. K. Maitra and Indra Sen, mathematicians like R. Vaidyanathaswami, seasoned politicians like Surendra Mohan Ghosh, Kannada poets like D. R. Bendre and V. K. Gokak, Sanskrit scholars like Acharya Abhaya-dev, and businessmen, industrialists, civil servants, diplomats — all were drawn to the Lighthouse from different points of the compass. Some felt they had reached their destined port, while others stayed for a while and put back to the sea hoping to return again, may be for a longer stay.

III

The Yoga-Ashram at Pondicherry that has been over sixty years a-growing is a hallowed area and a unique spiritual laboratory. It is easy to feel confused or to hug misapprehensions about the Ashram. But, actually, there is no need to be on the defensive about the Ashram. It is not a religious, social, educational or political organisation. It is not a “public body”. It is not a corporation. It is not a caravanserai. In physical terms, an Ashram is the house or houses of a Guru or Master of spiritual philosophy in which he lives with the pupils who have come to him for instruction. The tradition of retirement from the world for study and meditation in an Ashram was already ancient at the time of Gautama Buddha, and Ashrams still exist in large numbers in India; “all depends on the Teacher and ends with his lifetime, unless there is another Teacher who can take his place”.¹⁷ The part played by the Guru in the spiritual development of his disciples is most important, but

¹⁷ *Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram* (1948), p. 53.

it is not susceptible to cold categorisation or evaluation; a great deal must depend upon the variables Guru, disciple, *vidyā*, place, time and circumstance. It would, perhaps, be convenient to distinguish between the three main channels along which the Guru's influence can flow to the disciple and flood the tablelands of his aspiration, ardour and effort:

Firstly, transmission by written or oral teaching, instruction, or advice. Secondly, transmission by example: indeed the Master is a person who has already realised oneness with the Divine and whose life is a manifestation of this oneness. Thirdly, transmission by invisible influence and occult action. This last is the most important of the three; it is a tangible and constant reality for the advanced disciple.¹⁸

If the disciple is lucky, his lot will be cast in the hallowed company of a World-Teacher; but ordinarily it is enough for the disciple if in his eyes the Guru represents the divine wisdom, conveys to him something of the divine ideal or makes him sense the filiations between the human soul and the Eternal. The Guru's is a difficult and unique vocation, a "trust from above"; it is his destiny to be "a channel, a vessel or a representative"; and essentially "he is a man helping his brothers, a child leading children, a Light kindling other lights, an awakened Soul awakening souls, at highest a Power or Presence of the Divine calling to him other powers of the Divine".¹⁹

¹⁸ P. B. Saint-Hilaire, *The Message of Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram* (1947), p. 20. Also *The Synthesis of Yoga*: "Teaching, example, influence—these are the three instruments of the Guru" (pp. 74-5).

¹⁹ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 76.

While it is true that the Sri Aurobindo Ashram shares with all genuine Ashrams past and present a basically spiritual motivation, it is still not exactly the kind of Ashram people are commonly apt to visualise — an inaccessible nook in a jungle or on mountain fastnesses where a group of ochre-clad *sādhus* undergo austerities and do single-minded tapasya to be able to get for ever beyond the endless chain of birth and death and birth again! On the other hand, the Ashram at Pondicherry may be called — to use the word in no derogatory sense — a modern Ashram and a scientific one. It was located in 1926 in two houses in much the cleanest part of Pondicherry near the seashore. As the sadhaks increased in number, the Ashram has since had to take over several new buildings distributed over a fairly wide area; some buildings have had to be reconditioned, and some new structures too have come up. Describing the character and aims of the Ashram, Sri Aurobindo has remarked:

This Ashram has been created with another object than that ordinarily common to such institutions, not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and a field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life which would in the final end be moved by a higher spiritual consciousness and embody a greater life of the spirit.²⁰

Vairāgya or meditative retirement or *mokṣa* is not the sole or even the primary aim; the *sādhaks* are not sannyasis, not necessarily, and sannyasis are not excluded either. If the admission of women itself might have struck people as a dangerous novelty, at Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo not only admitted early two European ladies — Mirra Richard and Miss Dorothy Hodgson — as

²⁰ *On Yoga II*, Tome One, p. 823.

sadhaks, but installed the former in charge of the Ashram as the Mother and gave the latter the spiritual name of 'Vasavadutta' ('one who has given herself') or simply 'Datta'! Other ladies came presently, and sometimes the wife stayed in the Ashram while the husband followed his profession elsewhere, and sometimes the husband became a sadhak while the wife stayed back; and, of course, some couples joined the Ashram together. The problem of 'human relationships' is a ticklish one for the sadhak, but Sri Aurobindo's guidelines in the matter can give no room for ambiguity:

When one enters the spiritual life, the family ties which belong to the ordinary nature fall away — one becomes indifferent to the old things. There need be no harshness in it at all. To remain tied to the old physical affections would mean to remain tied to the ordinary nature and that would prevent spiritual progress.²¹

The rule about personal relations in this Yoga is this: (1) all personal relations to disappear in the single relation between the sadhak and the Divine; (2) All personal (psychic-spiritual) relations to proceed from the Divine Mother, determined by her, and to be part of the single relation with the Divine Mother.²²

Our view is that the normal thing in Yoga is for the entire flame of the nature to turn towards the Divine and the rest must wait for the true basis: to build higher things on the sand and mire of the ordinary consciousness is not safe.²³

Wife, comrade, son, brother, daughter, equally are they all fellow-sadhaks and they are near and dear because

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 789. ²² *ibid.*, p. 792. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 795.

all are one with us in the Divine. Human relationships — brotherhood, love, friendship — are sacred things and are worthy of being cherished because all flow from a convergent relationship to the Divine, but they will prove deceptive and destructive when they are centred in the ego. Trust the true warmth of the pure flame of psychic love but beware of the flawed fuel of ego-desire!

The coming of the children was a development during the early years of the second world war. For personal and security reasons, some sadhaks desired permission to keep their families in the Ashram; and when this was given the children came too. It was presently felt that these children — who were growing in number — should receive suitable education, and so a School was started on 2 December 1943 with about twenty children on the roll. With the School came a Playground, and physical education — games, athletics, sports — came to occupy a visibly important place in Ashram life. It was after the communal riots of 1946 that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother felt that boys and girls — and even grown-up sadhaks — might with advantage give due attention to their physical fitness. When eyebrows were raised within the Ashram and without regarding the wisdom of giving sports and athletics a place in Yoga, Sri Aurobindo wrote to a correspondent at some length and clarified the position. The sports were mainly for the children of the school, but they had to attend to their studies as well. The younger sadhaks were merely allowed — not enjoined or even advised — to join in these sports, and these sadhaks did other things also in the way of Karma-yoga. But it might be asked, “Why any sports at all in an Ashram?”, which could only be answered by, “Why not?” And, besides, the Ashram at Pondicherry was a

different kind of Ashram altogether:

...this is not that orthodox kind of Ashram. It includes life in Yoga, and once we admit life we can include anything that we find useful for life's ultimate and immediate purpose and not inconsistent with the works of the Spirit. After all, the orthodox Ashram came into being only after Brahman began to shun all connection with the world and the shadow of Buddhism stalked over all the land and the Ashrams turned into monasteries. The old Ashrams were not entirely like that; the boys and young men who were brought up in them were trained in many things belonging to life: the son of Pururavas and Urvashie practised archery in the Ashram of a Rishi and became an expert bowman, and Karna became the disciple of a great sage in order to acquire from him the use of powerful weapons. So there is no *a priori* ground why sports should be excluded from life of an Ashram like ours when we are trying to equate life with the Spirit.²⁴

It was about this time too (the years immediately after the war and the coming of independence) that Sri Aurobindo set forth in ample detail his views on physical education and on the ideal of the perfect body. It was not simply a question of health, strength and fitness of the body, important as this was; of even greater consequence was the "development of discipline and morale and sound and strong character". And certain sports could also help "to form and even necessitate the qualities of courage, hardihood, energetic action and initiative or call for skill, steadiness of will or rapid decision and

²⁴ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 414.

action, the perception of what is to be done in an emergency and dexterity in doing it".²⁵ The best education of the mind would be incomplete without the education of the body, and it was no more than the reaffirmation of the Hellenic ideal of a healthy mind in a healthy body. But there was something else as well, rather more characteristic of the ancient Indian ideal:

If our seeking is for a total perfection of the being, the physical part of it cannot be left aside; for the body is the material basis, the body is the **instrument** which we have to use. *Sariram khalu dharmasādhanam*, says the old Sanskrit adage, — the body is the means of the fulfilment of Dharma.... A total perfection is the ultimate aim which we set before us, for our ideal is the Divine Life which we wish to create here, the life of the Spirit fulfilled on earth.... That cannot be unless the body too undergoes a transformation, unless its action and functioning attain to a supreme capacity and the perfection which is possible to it or which can be made possible.... It (the body) may even in the end be suffused with a light and beauty and bliss from the Beyond and the life divine assume a body divine.²⁶

In other words, if integral perfection is the ideal of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga, the perfection of the body must form part of it and must therefore find a place in the Ashram scheme of education. And the purpose of this part of the Ashram discipline would be, in the Mother's words, "to build a body, beautiful in form, harmonious in posture, supple and agile in its movements, powerful in

²⁵ *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 3.

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 9. 11.

its activities and resistant in its health and organic functions”.

In the life of the Ashram, the first decisive turn was taken on 24 November 1926, when Sri Aurobindo retired into the background asking the Mother to shape anew the outer and inner life of the community of sadhaks. Sri Aurobindo himself was now rather like the Witness Spirit behind the scenes, and besides his advice was always available to the Mother. As he wrote on 25 February 1945 to a disciple:

It has been an arduous and trying work for the Mother and myself to keep up this Ashram, with its ever increasing numbers, to make both ends meet and at times to prevent deficit budgets and their results; specially in this war time, when the expenses have climbed to a dizzy and fantastic height.... Carrying on anything of this magnitude without any settled income could not have been done if there had not been the working of a divine Force.²⁷

In the pre-1926 period, as the Mother has acknowledged, the Ashram had been only “a collection of individuals... without a collective organisation... one could say it had a general value, but it was something very floating, without a collective reality”.²⁸ The aim, then, was to make collectivity as real as individuality, and besides to make this collective reality embrace even the individualities of those sadhaks who couldn’t stay in the Ashram always. The whole point of Sri Aurobindo’s teaching has been that there are overhead planes of consciousness above the mental, and it is possible to bring them down

²⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 615.

²⁸ *Bulletin*, XV, 2, April 1963 (Report of the Mother’s Conversation).

to inform and heighten our everyday life; and that, in the depth of things, there is a will much stronger than our surface human will, and this deeper force of action *can* be brought to the forefront to direct our actions. It is in the light of these profound truths that the Mother has given new life and form to the Ashram:

All our endeavour is to make this consciousness and this will govern our lives and action, and organise all our activities.... Since 1926 when Sri Aurobindo retired and gave me full charge of it... all has grown up and developed like the growth of a forest, and each service was created, not by any artificial planning, but by a living and dynamic need. This is the secret of constant growth and endless progress.²⁹

What was done in those early years — the thirties especially — was to prepare the individual consciousness to admit and recognise the necessity for a collective individuality, to help the sadhaks to shed their superficial angularities and egoistic separativities, and to tune themselves to the music of interdependence governed by the *śruti* of the Divine Will. Scores of houses have had to be secured or rented, and various services have had to be organised — partly because the growing numbers in the Ashram have to be enabled to live active, orderly, healthy and purposive lives, but even more because *all* life comes within the purview of this world-changing Yoga and every type of activity has to be used as a controlled experiment for the evolution of the higher life. But “work” in the Ashram has no status-symbol attached to it, nor is it remunerated as in the outside world; as Sri Aurobindo once explained the *raison d’être* behind the

²⁹ *ibid.*, XVI. 3, August 1964, p. 96.

assignment and execution of work in the Ashram —

The work here is not intended for showing one's capacity or having a position... but as a field and an opportunity for the Karmayoga part of the integral Yoga, for learning to work in the true yogic way, dedication through service, practical selflessness, obedience, scrupulousness, discipline, setting the Divine and the Divine's work first and oneself last, harmony, patience, forbearance, etc.³⁰

There was, then, the question of "choice" or "acceptance": how were the sadhaks selected from among those who expressed the desire to join the Ashram? Quite obviously, there had to be restrictions; although many might hear the call, only a few could be chosen. Superficial or supercilious observers have wondered why So-and-so was selected and how Such-and-such were rejected. What were the criteria? Sometimes some of the sadhaks themselves have felt baffled, and have even taken their puzzlement to Sri Aurobindo; and on one such occasion, he answered:

It is necessary or rather inevitable that in an Ashram which is a "laboratory"... for a spiritual and supramental Yoga, humanity should be variously represented. For the problem of transformation has to deal with all sorts of elements favourable and unfavourable. The same man indeed carries in him a mixture of these things. If only sattwic and cultured men come for yoga, men without very much of the vital difficulty in them, then, because the difficulty of the vital element in terrestrial nature has not been faced and overcome, it might well be that the endeavour would fail.... Those in the

³⁰ *On Yoga* II, Tome One, pp. 826-7.

Ashram come from all quarters and are of all kinds; it cannot be otherwise.³¹

More recently, Surendra Mohan Ghosh too has reported how Sri Aurobindo once told him: "The people outside think that the Mother selects very spiritually advanced people for the Ashram. Nothing of the kind. She selects different types.... She wants to observe how the Divine works in different types".³² The Ashram society was the microcosm of the macrocosmic global human race; and the integral Yoga was verily a pilot-project in the dynamics of individual and collectivist change, and the "instruments" were therefore chosen with that object in view as well.

As in the choice of the sadhaks, in the assignment of work to them also there was not always an immediately discoverable correlation between aptitude, attainments, qualifications and experience and the kind of work that was allotted. An intellectual might be first asked to work in the furniture section or to dust books in the Ashram library or to read proofs; a prominent businessman might be asked to wash plates in the Dining Room; a member of a learned profession might be put in charge of nuts and bolts and screws; and so on. On the other hand, the work assigned may often seem to have an exact correspondence to the sadhak's visible capacities; at least, the sadhak will be seen — in due course — to grow from within the requisite power and personality for the job. There is no mystery in all this, however; as Sri Aurobindo wrote on one occasion to a disciple:

The work in the Ashram was not meant as a service to humanity or to a section of it called the sadhaks of the Ashram.... The work was meant as

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 828. ³² *Mother India* (March 1971), pp. 114-5.

a service to the Divine and as a field for the inner opening to the Divine, surrender to the Divine alone, rejection of ego and all the ordinary vital movements and the training in a psychic elevation, selflessness, obedience, renunciation of all mental, vital or other self-assertion of the limited personality.³³

The Mother too has said more or less the same thing, though in a different language; the key word is 'sacerdocy':

That was my first basis in forming the Ashram, that the work done must be an offering to the Divine. Instead of letting oneself go in the current of one's nature, of one's mood, one must keep constantly in mind this kind of feeling that you are a representative of the Supreme Knowledge, the Supreme Truth, the Supreme Law, and you must apply it in the most honest way, in the most sincere way you are capable of; then you make great progress yourself....³⁴

In short, "work" in the Ashram is not for work's sake, not for the display of ability, but "a field of sadhana, for getting rid of the lower personality and its reactions and acquiring a full surrender to the Divine".³⁵ The work assigned to a sadhak is meant to meet his true inner need rather than buoy up his own opinion of himself. On the one hand, the "work" is necessary for the complex and efficient functioning of the Ashram; on the other hand, the work will be the means for the psychic opening of the sadhak and his attunement to the divine

³³ *On Yoga II*, Tome One, p. 824.

³⁴ *Bulletin*, XVI. 3, August 1964, p. 45.

³⁵ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 713.

purpose. Two attitudes of dissent are possible: the sadhak may feel that a low or inferior kind of work has been assigned to him, or he may grouse that he has been burdened with a too difficult task. As for the former, all work ranks the same with the Divine; and as for latter, the work being always an offering to the Divine, the necessary support will surely come from the Divine. It is the Divine's work, and the Divine force does the work through him and also helps him with his sadhana. In the ultimate analysis, aren't the work, the doer and the instrument one and the same, the Divine itself?

The sadhaks have no doubt come to the Ashram to live the higher spiritual life, but this life is still of the earth, and has to stand the tests of viability and effectivity. The Ashram doesn't treat "spiritual life" as something apart from — much less quite antagonistic to — everyday life. The "spiritual" problem is to open one's consciousness and charge it with the vibrations of the Truth, but while the sadhak is engaged in the task of beyonding the ego and harnessing the Divine, he is also work-happy doing one of the hundreds of things that go to make the variegatedly rich life of the Ashram. Teaching, printing, proof-reading, binding, typewriting, painting, music, gate duty, sports, paper-manufacture, scent-making, doll-making, kitchen-service, dining hall service, banking, accountancy, plumbing, bookselling, photography, poultry, dairy-management, farming, gardening, flower-arrangement, bakery, civil, mechanical, electrical and sanitary engineering, nursing, health service, town planning, architecture, tailoring, furniture service, footwear service, construction and maintenance service, flour-mill, oil-mill, fuel service, weaving service, cottage industries, transport

service, postal service, etc. — indeed, there is no end to the bewildering network of activities in the Ashram that is nevertheless a seamless web of total harmony. Although some paid labour is employed, the main brunt of the responsibility for the work of the Ashram is borne by the sadhaks themselves, for whom all work is worship or “sacerdocy”. It is the psychic and spiritual relation between the sadhak and the Divine that holds the key to his progress in his vocation, in his sacerdocy. He steadily grows inwardly, his consciousness sprouts new wings of comprehension and perfect functioning, his *karmayoga* becomes one with his *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. Sadhana issuing in efficient work, and work in its turn awakening the soul within and charging it with power and purpose: integral progress is the result of this zig-zag reversible reaction between inner life and outer activity. The whole Ashram, then, has been a theatre of action with a push towards perfection; and the whole Ashram is also a laboratory of research in Yoga where the progressive gains of the sadhana are more and more reflected in the manifold works of the Ashram.

Yoga could be described as Nature intensified, concentrated, accelerated, for the invisible slow processes that may have taken ten thousand or a million years are pushed through a single life-span or a midnight vigil. Even as scientific and technological research through speculation, experimentation in a laboratory and pilot-projecting have often set in advance the clock of our material civilisation, Yogic endeavour through spiritual insights, realisations, and controlled experiments in an Ashram — or the world itself as an extended Ashram — might set the pace for humanity’s evolutionary march. A thousand experiments may fail, yet the next one may be

able to open the doors of resistance for a mass-march through the wide-open gates. The intended alchemic change of mentalised egoistic self-divided self-corrupting self-destroying man into spiritualised (or supramentalised) man in unison with all humanity and all Nature and enacting wholeness and harmony and the life divine, such a radical, such a revolutionary change cannot be effected except as the result of strivings, advances, setbacks, fresh advances and the final leap to the Goal. "There is a sort of locked struggle", Sri Aurobindo had written in 1915, "the spiritual force insisting against the resistance of the physical world... but the eye of knowledge looks beyond and sees that it is only a protracted episode".³⁶ The faith born of knowledge sustains the intestine struggle, for the victory *must* be won, and if possible in our life-time. This explains the faith of the growing number of sadhaks — growing steadily from 1926 to 1938, and at an even faster rate afterwards — who have volunteered to be mobilised to engage in the Yogic battle against the ignorance, the egoistic desires and the general human incapacity. Behind the infinite outer freedom from all rules and regulations, from all social and intellectual restraints, from all financial and hierarchic incentives, the inner link with the Divine — to the extent it has been established and is being maintained — enables the sadhaks in the Ashram and outside to accomplish the desired and destined inner change as well as the consequential collective change. To reach the Light, to manifest it in oneself and in the collectivity — that is the essence of the sadhana of this Yoga. But although it could be stated so simply, to practise it and register unqualified success — oh how difficult, how beset with peril and uncertainty! Yet beyond

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 776.

the quicksands of doubt and the fog of error, there surely looms yonder the unfading Light, the firm Victory, the divine Ananda.

IV

When 24 November 1926 had come and gone, the sadhaks knew that something very significant had happened. The Master went into a deeper retirement, and the Mother took full charge of the Ashram. It was popularly assumed that the world of the Overmind (or the world of the gods) had come down even to the physical plane. Sure enough, in the ensuing days, weeks and months, the sadhaks had striking experiences — “minute-to-minute miracles”, as K. D. Sethna describes them. Some of the sadhaks had the feeling that they had received a mysterious accession of unpredictable power — it was as though anything might happen. The total effect, however, was hardly reassuring, and Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had to resolve to stay the sudden descent of the Force. The sadhana had to go on, but less spectacularly though not less intensively; Sri Aurobindo and the Mother decided to concentrate — and advise others also to concentrate — on the physical, the subconscious and the inconscient.

The sudden opening up of the mental horizons — the quick unfreezing of the normally ego-ruled forms of vital energy — must inevitably produce startling visions and frightening experiences; and yet, should the physical base — the *ādhāra* — be unequal to the force of the descent, there might be terrible reactions. According to the ancient legend, Bhagirata brought the Ganga

down from Heaven, but the force of the impact on the earth was so great that Shiva himself had to be requested to contain the Force. In a condition of trance or *samādhi*, the body is laid asleep, individuality is painlessly transcended, and all separative consciousness is suspended; only the soul is awake in the oneness of omnipresent Reality. In a condition of sustained mental illumination, it is possible to infer the Truth, the Right, the Vast — the reality of Sachchidananda. One may accept intellectually the validity of Mach's Principle that not an atom can be really destroyed unless the entire universe also is destroyed, and not a thing can be newly created unless everything else also suffers some infinitesimal transmutation. But when one strays lower — to the heart which is the seat of the emotions, to the vital centre where the cauldron of desire keeps boiling constantly, to the physical plane where pain and pleasure fight their own unending battles, and to the still lower subconscious region of nightmarish fancies and the inconscient cellular mini-universes where a Walpurgis-night is perpetually being enacted — when consciousness makes the exploratory descent towards these lower planes of existence, when the world's regiments of confusions, contradictions and chaos batter through the private egoistic shell to fill it with the mud and filth and thorn and thistle and poison and perdition of all phenomenal existence, when such hell is let loose indeed, how shall the *ādhāra* bear the impact and the invasion and the insurrection?

To bring the higher consciousness to the lower planes is to be able to feel everybody's pain and pleasure, to bear everybody's kicks and caresses, to stomach everybody's nightmarish visions and fantasies, to survive every-

body's cellular disturbances and tissue-deteriorations:

Accepting life, he (the sadhaka of the integral Yoga) has to bear not only his own burden, but a great part of the world's burden too along with it, as a continuation of his own sufficiently heavy load. Therefore his Yoga has much more of the nature of a battle than others'; but this is not only an individual battle, it is collective war waged over a considerable country. He has not only to conquer in himself the forces of egoistic falsehood and disorder, but to conquer them as representatives of the same adverse and inexhaustible forces in the world. Their representative character gives them a much more obstinate capacity of resistance, an almost endless right to recurrence. Often he finds that even after he has won persistently his own personal battle, he has still to win it over and over again in a seemingly interminable war, because his inner existence has already been so much enlarged that not only it contains his own being with its well-defined needs and experiences, but is in solidarity with the being of others, because in himself he contains the universe.³⁷

It is thus that the lower we go, the more difficult it becomes to maintain one's poise and calm and equality; and yet, unless these can be made to seep down to the lowest levels, the task of transformation must remain incomplete. Any moment there can be a Vesuvius eruption from below, and the sadhana of months or years can be destroyed by the sprouting lava of a random moment. If salvation or *mukti* were to mean a non-physical non-terrestrial state of ineffable or transcendental bliss, as it

³⁷ *The Synthesis of Yoga*, pp. 87-8.

meant to numberless people in the past, our everyday life here would be something to be merely suffered, its limitations and obscurations would have to be contained somehow — till physical death gave the necessary release. If, on the contrary, man were verily the advanced scout of the evolutionary adventure, if man were really destined to rise higher still and enact the Life Divine even here on this earth, it must then be possible for him to change his present nature totally into supernature. The higher consciousness must be lured to descend and inhabit and transform the lower planes (the lowest inconscient not excluded) — and this must be done regardless of the difficulties involved. For Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and their disciples, there was no escaping the rigorous logic or even the plain sense of the matter: either they had to give up the integral Yoga, or they had to dare the consequences of the sadhana being brought down to the lowest levels. The successive shocks and disturbances and exasperations had to be met squarely and transcended till the intervening regions of the resistance were all purified and spiritualised (or supramentalised), and from highest to lowest there was but one consciousness, one sensibility, one personality, but all moulded in the Divine substance.

As regards the outer growth of the Ashram after 1926, relevant “facts and figures” are not lacking to satisfy human curiosity: how the number of sadhaks increased year by year, when and which new buildings were secured and for what purpose, which new Services were organised and under whose departmental direction, how the different industries came into existence, how the sports and athletics are being organised so efficiently, how the Ashram runs a well-equipped surgery and dis-

pensary, how a Centre of Education, a sugar refinery, and a perfumery are being run, how the magnificent modern guest-house, the Golconde, has come to be constructed, and so on. But all this is only the visible impressive façade, while the reality is still the transforming reactor within. It is the inner Agni — the Agni behind even the Saura Agni or the solar fire — that is the hub of the process. The stage is the inner world, the worlds within — the vital, the physical, the subconscious, the inconscient. But what do we know about this quintessential aspect of the Ashram's history — or of Sri Aurobindo's history — after 1926? We have only some broad clues, and we should try to piece them together in the best way possible.

Recalling the time when he first went to the Ashram (December 1927), K. D. Sethna has said recently:

Instead of bringing down the Great Gods, the effort now was to start from the bottom, not from the top — to dig, as it were, into the subconscious and gradually prepare the purification of the human consciousness and nature and bring out what Sri Aurobindo has called the psychic being.... Thus the evolutionary creature would develop slowly, gradually with a lot of hardships but still with a sure footing.

Such was the condition, the spiritual condition of the sadhana into which I happened to stumble.³⁸

Nirod's testimony is not different:

I came to the Ashram at a period when the sadhana was going on in the subconscious, as Sri Aurobindo said to me. The subconscious is like a

³⁸ *Mother India* (December 1970), p. 650.

dense forest; we find a superb description of it in his *A God's Labour*.³⁹

And Sri Aurobindo himself wrote to Dilip that he was engaged in "dredging, dredging, dredging the mire of the subconscious".⁴⁰ And here are some more excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's letters belonging to the period 1934-6:

We tried to do it (the sadhana) from above through the mind and higher vital, but it could not be because the sadhaks were not ready to follow — their lower vital and physical refused to share in what was coming down or else misused it and became full of exaggerated and violent reactions. Since then the sadhana as a whole has come down along with us into the physical consciousness.... The total descent into the physical is a very troublesome affair — it means a long and trying pressure of difficulties, for the physical is normally obscure, inert, impervious to the Light. It is a thing of habits, very largely a slave of the subconscious and its mechanical reactions.... We would have preferred to do all the hard work ourselves there and called others down when an easier movement was established, but it did not prove possible.⁴¹

I am myself living in the physical consciousness and have been for several years. At first it was a plunge into the physical — into all the obscurity and inertia, afterwards it was a station in the physical open to the higher and higher consciousness

³⁹ *ibid.*, February 1967, p. 32.

⁴⁰ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 51.

⁴¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 387.

and slowly having out in it the struggle of transformation of the physical consciousness with a view to prepare it for the supramental change.⁴²

But, of course, anyone who wants to change earth-nature must first accept it in order to change it. To quote from an unpublished poem of my own (*A God's Labour*):

He who would bring the heavens here,
Must descend himself into clay
And the burden of earthly nature bear
And tread the dolorous way....⁴³

No, it is not with the Empyrean that I am busy: I wish it were. It is rather with the opposite end of things; it is in the Abyss that I have to plunge to build a bridge between the two. But that too is necessary for my work and one has to face it.⁴⁴

What seems to have happened is something like this: the spiritual atmosphere in the Ashram was being gradually charged with increasing power and purpose during the years 1922-6, and this concentration rose to a high intensity in the weeks following Sri Aurobindo's birthday on 15 August 1926, culminating in the siddhi of 24 November signifying the descent of the overmental Force. In the months following — for nearly a year — the disciples had certain unusual experiences which were not capable of explanation in rational terms. The events or experiences had almost the look of 'miracles', but actually they were overmental superimpositions on our normal three-dimensional Euclidean material world. To be engrossed in such feats of supranormal occurrences would have meant leaving the lower life where it was,

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 234. ⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 222. ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 222-3.

but structuring glittering edifices on a recalcitrant or inertia-ridden physical base: an open invitation to sudden eruptions with their disastrous consequences. Sri Aurobindo therefore ordained that the tenuous new connection between the overmental gods and the disciples should be cut, and that the sadhaks should do the yoga of transformation at the material or physical base — the emphasis now being on Karmayoga in its many forms expressive of the Ashram's variegated communal life. To build except on a supramental base would have been to repeat the familiar "old fiasco" once again. The building of the Life Divine had to be — it could only be — on strong physical foundations: the consciousness that had been the monopoly of the mind and heart and the vital had to be transmitted to the body also and to the very seats of the inconscience. Just before November 1934, when there was the possibility of the Supramental Light coming down to the physical, all the subconscient mud arose to put it off — yet Sri Aurobindo also added consolingly: "But there are red crimson lights. One is Supramental Love, the other is Supramental Physical Force".⁴⁵ The commandment of the integral Yoga is that, not the mind alone, not the heart alone, "even the body shall remember God" — but that could happen only when the body shed its inertia and inconscience and automatism, and the very cells learned to live consciously — learned to aspire for the Divine, to reject false movements, to act always as if fully tuned to the Divine Will. The sadhana in the physical thus means to strive to substitute an inert or false or sluggish consciousness by a true one. It is pertinent to recall here what the Mother has said in the course of a conversation:

⁴⁵ *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 51.

...each time an illness is cured, an accident is avoided, each time a catastrophe, even a terrestrial catastrophe is avoided, all that is always an intervention of the Vibration of Harmony into the Vibration of Disorder that causes the disorder to stop....

And this Vibration (that I feel and see) gives the impression of a fire; it is that which the Vedic Rishis must have translated as the Flame — in the human consciousness, in man, in Matter.⁴⁶

The process of transformation would thus have to be carried out by the Flame, the ultimate Agni, “the warm golden dust”, the supreme Ray of the Spirit — as the result of the descent of the Supramental Light. Just as mental and vital peace have to be secured by flinging out the disturbing, distorting or invading thoughts and cravings and obsessions, purposeful peace in the physical has to be won by beating back the hordes of false vibrations and opening the cells to the alchemic influence of the Vibration of Harmony, the Vibration of Peace and the Vibration of Bliss. Then the whole man — body, vital, mind — would become a perfectly stringed instrument, capable of the music of truest thought, love and action completely tuned to the *śruti* of the Will of God. The whole adventure may perhaps be summed up as in Narad’s prophetic words:

Across the dust and mire of the earthly plain.
On many-guarded lines and dangerous fronts.
In dire assaults, in wounded slow retreats...
Awaiting the tardy trumpets of the dawn...
Marches the army of the waylost god...
At length his front’s indomitable line

⁴⁶ *Bulletin*, XVI. 3, August 1964, pp. 89, 93.

Forces the last passes of the Ignorance:
 Advancing beyond Nature's last known bounds...
 It mounts through a miraculous upper air
 Till climbing the mute summit of the world
 He stands upon the splendour-peaks of God.⁴⁷

V

In all Yoga, and more so in the integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, the Guru's role is of supreme importance. No doubt the ultimate Guru, like the ultimate Shastra, is lodged *within*, but at least till that advanced stage of the Yoga is reached — no easy matter at all — the reliance on the Guru has to be absolute. The sadhak could profitably read *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Mother* and the other works of the Master, and this anyone could do anywhere, and this is also the way in which many have had their first spiritual encounters with Sri Aurobindo. In the Ashram itself, the sadhaks were in a privileged position, since they could receive personal guidance from Sri Aurobindo or the Mother, — for even after his retirement he was willing to write detailed letters to the sadhaks on problems relating to their progress in the Yoga. But there could also be other means of control and guidance: *praṇām* and *darśan*, for example, which are central to the practice of Yoga. *Darśan*, *praṇām* — even the sense of the Guru's presence although not actually seen — have been a felt power of infinite potency. To see the Guru, to be seen by him — to bend one's head to touch the Guru's feet, to be blessed by the touch of the Guru's palm on one's head

⁴⁷ *Savitri*, p. 520.

— these have been efficacious ways of receiving guidance and Grace, for the Guru could verily be the channel for the transmission of transforming vibrations from the Divine. Even if the Guru is not physically present before the sadhak, his invisible occult influence will not be hedged in by place and time and outer circumstances.

Sadhaks had *praṇām* and *darśan* almost daily before 24 November 1926, but afterwards Sri Aurobindo gave darshan only on three days in the year, and after 1938 on four days. When the number of sadhaks and visitors increased more and more, *darśan* did not include *praṇām* as well. But *praṇām* to the Mother has continued all along, and special *darśans* too. 'Birthdays' — whether Sri Aurobindo's, the Mother's or the individual sadhak's — have particular importance, and on such occasions Guru and disciple try to establish a personal link by means of the *praṇām* or at least a message of Blessings from the Guru. About the significance of the birthday meeting, Sri Aurobindo once wrote to a disciple:

There is a rhythm (one among many) in the play of the world-forces which is connected with the sun and the planets. That makes the birthday a day of possible renewal when the being is likely to be more plastic.⁴⁸

About *praṇām* itself — which might take the form of kneeling, the touch of the Guru's feet by head or hand, all done in a condition of inner surrender — it is easy to build foolish mental edifices. During the years of Sri Aurobindo's retirement, the disciples used to offer *praṇām* to the Mother — some almost daily — and several of them used to write to Sri Aurobindo about their reactions to the *praṇām*. And he invariably answered these

⁴⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 659.

letters with a divine patience! Thus, although in “retirement”, his direct and constant participation in the sadhaks’ spiritual progress was assured. Sri Aurobindo often used to say that his and the Mother’s were a single consciousness, and thus the result of *praṇām* and *darśan* was to establish or renew or reinforce the psychic link between the sadhak and the powers that represented the Divine to him. Sri Aurobindo has explained that the purpose of the momentary physical contact was only to facilitate the more important psychic opening or communion. Darshan at the time of collective meditation, whether with Sri Aurobindo or the Mother or both present, was an attempt “to bring down the right consciousness in the atmosphere of the Ashram”: and concentration and meditation are the means employed to effect the inner opening so that the descending Force may be received without obstruction or diversion. Regarding the right use of *darśan* and *praṇām*, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

Physical means (like darshan and touch in the Pranam)... are one means of approaching the Divine and receiving the Light and materialising the psychic contact, and so long as it is done in the right spirit and they are used for the true purpose they have their place.⁴⁹

An excessive cerebration or vital expectancy at the time of the *darśan* or *praṇām* could do more harm than good. The physical contact — sight, touch — being only the means to the psychic contact, the essential thing is to still the vital movements, still the mind, and achieve a condition of perfect plasticity for the Divine Force to operate:

The inner connection can only be developed by

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 663.

an inner concentration and aspiration, not by a mere outward Pranam every day....

The greatest test of love and devotion is... when it burns as strongly in long absence as in the presence.⁵⁰

Again and again and yet again Sri Aurobindo warned the sadhaks that the relationship between them and Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was a psychic, a spiritual, and not a purely mundane or physical or vital, bond — and it was not to be evaluated in material or mental categories:

The Ashram is not a schoolboys' class, nor is the Yoga a competitive examination.... At the Pranam the Mother puts her force to help the sadhak — what he ought to do is to receive quietly and simply, not to spoil the occasion by these foolish ideas and by watching who gets more of her hand and smile and who gets less....⁵¹

The heart of the secret is also the central principle of avatarhood: "The Divine has to put on humanity in order that the human being may rise to the Divine".⁵²

Those special occasions — the three or four annual *darśans* — were of course unique moments in the sadhaks' spiritual life. Different sadhaks have reacted differently — and the same sadhak on different occasions. Some have come from the *darśan* completely overwhelmed, with a sudden psychic efflorescence almost too powerful to bear. It is said that once an American visitor fell unconscious at the feet of Sri Aurobindo for about thirty minutes, and when he recovered consciousness declared that he had seen the whole map of Ame-

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 665. ⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 674.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 692.

rica at the feet of the Master!⁵³ Others have returned in a condition of supernal calm that continued for days. As Nirod wrote after a *darśan*:

When I came from your Darshan, it seemed as if it was Shiva himself I was seeing. I felt Ananda too. The consciousness of these things remained for two or three days, and then as if evaporated.

Sri Aurobindo promptly replied: "It has not evaporated but drawn back from the surface".⁵⁴ The normal feeling used to be that, after *darśan* or *darśan* and *praṇām*, one's inner being had been recharged (as batteries are) by the Divine, and with that spiritual renewal the sadhak felt that he would be able to stand the buffets of everyday life for many a long day. "If you get something by the darshan", Sri Aurobindo wrote to Nirod, "it might be better to go home and absorb it".⁵⁵ Of the *darśan* on 15 August 1936, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The last Darshan was good on the whole. I am not now trying to bring anything down on these days, but I am watching the progress in the action of the Force and Consciousness that are already there, the infiltration of a greater Light and Power from above, and there was a very satisfactory crossing of a difficult border which promises well for the future. A thing has been done which had long failed to accomplish itself and which is of great importance.⁵⁶

It would thus appear that the collective aspiration of a flowing stream of sadhaks could itself create a concentration of spiritual atmosphere conducive to a collective

⁵³ Narayan Prasad, *Life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, p. 79.

⁵⁴ *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo* (Second Series), p. 20.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 19. ⁵⁶ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 240.

advance in the Yoga although spearheaded by the Guru. The gains for the sadhaka, of course, are beyond accountancy, and even beyond recordation. But the poets have made some attempts all the same. Thus Nirod:

A moment's touch — what founts of joy arise
Running through dull grains of my life's dead sands
Like a cool stream...

The finite for this one moment brief drinks
The Infinite.

One moment only, alas!
Time seizes and Space dungeons and the dream,
The deep spell breaks.⁵⁷

Thus Arjava (J. A. Chadwick):

Shining lance, far above rifted woe,
Reveal to earth the ending of thy quest;
When thou to the Holy Logos shall be pressed,
The Hidden Love behind all universe
Sends ruby fire and ever-living flow, —
And night is fading, dreams of self disperse.⁵⁸

And thus, thirteen years later (1948), Themis after her *darśan*:

The far voices of the earth die:
And in the vast lone hush of Being, Thou
Foldest Thy love around my cry....
O power-winged Love, Thou bearest me
O'er storm-black gulfs and endless mires of sleep,
To sunlit heavens of purity.⁵⁹

The *darśan* was always a seminal moment, an act of divine insurance, a moment in time out of time when something that is truly timeless was sought and won. In the first twelve years after his retirement (1926-38), the

⁵⁷ *Sun-Blossoms*, p. 23. ⁵⁸ *Poems*, p. 116. ⁵⁹ *Poems* (1952), p. 1.

darśan was a leisurely procession, and each sadhak or visitor had some little time to himself when he could touch Sri Aurobindo's feet and offer pranam, and he would then place the palm of his hand on the disciple's head and "the Master's Grace would rain over us like the Amitabha Buddha's". The people who had *darśan* were comparatively fewer, and the *darśan* went on from morning till past noon. But after 1938, the number of visitors wishing to have *darśan* increased greatly, and the sadhaks too had grown in number; and the *darśan* had therefore to be somewhat hurried through in the afternoon. Every *darśan* day was a festive occasion, not in any worldly sense—for there was no noise, no fanfare, no vitalistic display—but with the flag of aspiration and hope fluttering within, responding to the intimations of the Spirit with which the whole atmosphere of the Ashram and its environs came to be specially charged on those days. In fact, the visitors would start coming days before the *darśan*, and on that day the stream would grow into a flood. In their hundreds they would come—princes and paupers, financiers and politicians, merchants and landlords, saints and sinners, teachers and students, even hesitant scoffers and half-hearted believers—all desiring to have *darśan* of Sri Aurobindo. Did they know—did *all* of them know—what *darśan* meant? What precise experience was in store for them, how exactly it was going to grow into their being and shape their future—this they couldn't know as yet. Perhaps it was only an idle curiosity that had brought some to Pondicherry; and some might have caught the contagion of enthusiasm from their friends; and a few might have earlier chanced to read one of Sri Aurobindo's works and been temporarily swept off

their feet. Perhaps, again, some might have learned by slow degrees to follow the career of Sri Aurobindo and admire the poet, the prophet of nationalism, and the philosopher, but failed to go further — might have nurtured a giant scepticism about the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo — and come now at last to see for themselves whether the Yogi was really more than, or even the explanation of, the poet and prophet and philosopher. Men and women of all categories were they, and many children too, some carrying heaven in their hearts, others merely frolicsome and gay, and many suddenly charmed and chastened by the Ashram atmosphere.

On *darsan* days the Ashram would be filled with a suppressed excitement. There would be heard — more than on other days — the accents of many languages. Did it matter if one didn't know who one's neighbour was? Everyone was a co-pilgrim to the shrine of Fulfilment, and that alone mattered. One might whisper to one's neighbour if one cared to, but it was safer, on the whole, to sit or move about quietly. It was better to participate in the repast of silence; it was most becoming to seek refuge in the wisdom and strength of the uplifting reticence. Most of the sadhaks, and many even among the visitors, would have a noticeably abstracted air. They would sit, by themselves or in little clusters, on the pavements or on the steps of a flight of stairs, and would seem lost in thought. They were all on the threshold of a unique experience (if the regular sadhaks were to be believed), they felt projected into a strange new world — and they wondered what priceless revelation (or what dismal disappointment) was waiting for them round the corner.

The queue would be formed at last by about two in

the afternoon — usually a bright day, and a great day for Pondicherry. The queue would start moving, although hardly seeming to move; coiling upwards towards the old library, coiling downwards, emerging into the garden, and soon turning sharply towards the meditation hall. It would move on like an impossibly long centipede, enveloping the pillars, scaling the stairs — now in one direction now in another — and at last reaching the very hall, the very spot... such a long long queue with its cusps and crests, its links and breaks, its ascents and descents, swaying and moving and stopping and moving again. How patiently the pilgrims awaited their chance, how self-absorbed many of them stood, how reverently they clutched the *tulsī* garlands or the fair white flower or the bright red rose. “I cannot believe... I want to believe... I must believe... I will believe”: thus even the agnostic prayed, and hope and despair warred in his bosom, and he held the garland in a yet firmer grip.

The last turn taken, one’s eyes grazed over the intervening forms and rested on the two figures seated together in unblenched majesty and aura serene: Sri Aurobindo and the Mother! The great moment had come... there was a flood of the Light of Truth... and the mere mind staggered, the mere human frame lurched forward mechanically, but the eyes were held irretrievably as if divinely spell-bound. The crowning moment of all, and one faced the Master, one faced the Mother; it was impossible to face the scrutiny of those piercing eyes, to meet the benediction of that dissolving smile. A second or two, perhaps, certainly not much more... but who could keep count of the fleeting fragments of time? One rather glimpsed then the splendourous truth, *There shall be no more time!* Eternity was implicated in a grain of

Time... one all but crossed the boundaries of Time and Space! And, alas, one was already out of the room.

The pulses of life would then start beating again; the wires, the machinery of the mind would resume their work once more. The feet would mechanically know where to go and, back in one's room, one would be free to absorb the experience. The face of the Master had borne little resemblance to the published portraits and even less to one's deliberate imaginings, — yet it had worn a familiar look. Where had one seen the Master before? Was it the face of Zeus as it had appeared in an old book of mythology — or that of Aeschylus? Rishi Vasishtha had, perhaps, worn such radiance when he blessed King Dasharatha's son; perhaps Valmiki had sat even like that when the *Ramayana* in its entirety shaped itself before his wise and lustrous eyes. An hour later — and hours later — the vision remained, the experience persisted, the memory of the smile was like a balm to one who had often fallen on the thorns of life, the memory of the *brahmatej*, austere yet inconceivably beautiful, that was resplendent on Sri Aurobindo's face was like a renewal of strength and hope, and one dared to hope that even the frailest foulest clay could evolve — however long the journey and arduous the path — into the supermanhood of the Gnostic Being and the triune glory of Sachchidananda!

VI

Darśan and *Pranām* were special occasions — elected moments — when through physical contacts the physical is transcended and the whole being is wafted into the

regions of the spiritual sublime. But Sri Aurobindo also adopted other means to maintain contacts with the disciples in the Ashram and even outside. The letters that passed between him and the sadhaks were one channel of communication and guidance; and the renewed talks — under different circumstances inner and outer — after 1938 were another channel.

It was customary for the disciples to leave their queries and recordations of personal experience in a tray before 11 p.m. every day — the letters might pile up to a hundred or more — and Sri Aurobindo would sit up half the night answering them, and these replies would be distributed to the respective sadhaks by Nolini the next morning. The sadhaks could write about anything — almost anything — and some wrote twice a day and there was at least one sadhak who, on occasions, wrote thrice a day: and they wrote about their trials, their hopes, their dark nights, their dreary days, their sudden exultations and exhilarations, their strange fears and their leaden-eyed despairs — or they wrote about problems of philosophy, or Yoga theory and practice, or poetic inspiration and technique — or even on contemporary Indian and world politics. And the reply came giving the true balm of spiritual succour in the shape of a kindly-worded, conversationally-spoken, message — an epistle long or short, gay or serious, but always springing from the heart and from the home of Truth, and appropriate in every way to the nature of the query and the character and mood of the correspondent. And an important letter sent to a particular disciple soon became the common property of the inmates of the Ashram — sometimes typed copies were made available, although Sri Aurobindo himself usually wrote in his minute artistic hand using slips

of paper of divers sizes — and every sadhak derived what benefit he could, each according to his or her individual need and capacity.

There must now be in existence several thousands of these letters, and from time to time selections from (or collections of) these letters have been published to reach an audience wider than the Ashram, and as wide as the world. *The Riddle of This World* appeared in 1933, *Lights on Yoga* in 1935, *Bases of Yoga* in 1936; *The Mother* (1928) too had in the main a similar origin. Introducing the first series of *Letters of Sri Aurobindo* (1947), Kishor Gandhi wrote:

The letters of Sri Aurobindo are a vast literature of very great value... intended for direct and intimate help to disciples, they are written in a somewhat less lofty and difficult style than his other more metaphysical works and yet they bear that stamp of luminous authenticity and are charged with that High Wisdom that comes from the constant living in the Spirit's complete Truth.

More collections appeared, and then most of the letters pertaining to Yoga were brought out in two omnibus volumes, *Tomes One and Two of On Yoga — Book Two* (1958). Tome One comprises letters on 'The Supramental Evolution', 'Integral Yoga and the Other Paths', 'The Purpose of Avatarhood', 'The Foundations of the Sadhana', Sadhana through Work, Meditation, Love and Devotion, and similar topics; and Tome Two comprises letters on the Transformation of the Mind, the Vital, the Physical, the Subconscient and the Inconscient, and on the Triple Transformation, Psychic, Spiritual and Supramental. The letters have been graded and arranged with infinite care, and in their totality the two Tomes

constitute a many-limbed but unforbidding treatise complementary to *The Synthesis of Yoga*.

While appreciating the freedom and informality of the epistolary form, it is equally necessary to remember the implied limitations. Sri Aurobindo warned more than once against readers indiscriminately applying to themselves what had been written in a particular context:

It is not always safe to apply practically to oneself what has been written for another. Each sadhak is a case by himself and one cannot always or often take a mental rule and apply it rigidly to all who are practising the Yoga.... Each sadhak has a nature or turn of nature of his own and the movement of the yoga of two sadhaks, even where there are some resemblances between them, is seldom exactly the same....⁶⁰

People often catch hold of something written by me or said by the Mother, give it an interpretation quite other than or far beyond its true meaning and deduce from it a suddenly extreme and *logical* conclusion which is quite contrary to our knowledge and experience. It is natural, I suppose, and part of the game of the hostile forces; it is so much easier to come to vehement logical conclusions than to look at the Truth which is many-sided and whole.⁶¹

I thought it was understood that what I wrote to you about persons was private. Experiences, one's own or others' if one comes to know of them, should not be talked about or made a mat-

⁶⁰ *On Yoga II*, Tome One, pp. 830-1.

⁶¹ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 343.

ter of gossip. It is only if there can be some spiritual benefit to others, and even then if they are experiences of the past that one can speak of them. Otherwise it becomes like news of Abyssinia or Spain, something common and trivial for the vital mass-mind to chew and gobble.⁶²

But of course these cautions apply only to advice or comments or instructions regarding the sadhana of individual disciples. The broad general statements, the enunciations of principle, the elaborations of theory, the differentiations between states of mind, the precise definitions of terms (like 'peace', 'calm', 'quiet', 'silence'; or Sadhana, Tapasya, Aradhana, Dhyana),⁶³ the exact location of planes and parts of the being, the interpretations of particular visions, dreams and symbols, the fascinating excursions into philosophy, aesthetics, history or politics, these have a value for all. When the letters are torn from the relevant questions which provoked them, when portions of letters are separated and arranged along with portions of other letters so as to form reasonably coherent expositions or at least to make an ordered sequence of comments on the same or collateral topics — and this has been done with singular editorial patience and tact and skill in the two tomes of *On Yoga — Part Two* and in some of the earlier collections like *Lights on Yoga* and *Bases of Yoga* — the personal human touch, the contextual piquancy, even the sheer brilliance and gusto of the writing are inevitably lost. But in volumes like Nirodbaran's *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, the collection of letters entitled *Life - Literature - Yoga*, and Dilip's *Among the Great, Sri Aurobindo came to Me*

⁶² *On Yoga II*, Tome Two, p. 47.

⁶³ *ibid.*, Tome One, pp. 619, 516.

and *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem* — all of which include several of Sri Aurobindo's letters — it is easier to appreciate the personal touch with its humour and humanity as well as the universal application; the letters then become a voice near one's ear and a voice from above, verbal curtains that shut us in and are woven out of the delicate turns of common speech. A letter like the one Sri Aurobindo wrote to Dilip on the "logic of his doubts",⁶⁴ being impeccably phrased in rhythms akin to those of subdued but nervous conversational speech, plays upon one's tongue with disarming ease and friendliness and force. But it is in exchanges like the following that the true Guru-Sishya relationship is brought out, mingling the bantering and the sublime with a delightful freedom:

Nirodbaran: No joy, no energy. Don't like to read or write — as if a dead man were walking about. Do you understand the position? Any personal experience?

Sri Aurobindo: I quite understand: often had it myself devastatingly. That's why I always advise people who have it to cheer up and buck up.

To cheer up, buck up and the rest if you can, saying "Rome was not built in a day" — if you can't, gloom it through it till the sun rises and the little birds chirp and all is well.

Looks however as if you were going through a training in *vairāgya*. Don't much care for *vairāgya* myself, always avoided the beastly thing, but had to go through it partly, till I hit on *samatā* as a better trick. But *samatā* is difficult,

⁶⁴ Quoted in *Tirthankar (Among the Great)*, pp. 365-7.

vairāgya is easy, only damnably gloomy and uncomfortable.⁶⁵

Nirodbaran: My hard labour and effort deprive me of the joy of creation and discourage with a dread of the work. You say that this is because I am an "efforter" and "hower". Well, show me then the Grand Trunk Road.

Sri Aurobindo: There are two ways of arriving at the Grand Trunk Road. One is to climb and struggle and effortise (like the pilgrim who traverses India prostrating and measuring the way with his body: that is the way of effort). One day you suddenly find yourself on the G. T. R. when you least expect it. The other is to quiet the mind to such a point that a greater Mind of mind can speak through it. (I am not here talking of the Supramental.) You will do neither. Your mind refuses to be quiet — your vital kicks at the necessity of effort. One too active, the other too lazy. How can I show you the G.T.R. when you refuse either way of reaching it?⁶⁶

The innumerable letters that deal mainly with Yoga — either the underlying principles of the Yoga or intimate personal problems like those relating to food, desire, sex, illness, etc. have their practical value to sadhaks, for whom they are intended. An exercise in differentiation like the following must certainly prove helpful to a practising sadhak:

The difference between a vacant mind and a calm mind is this: that when the mind is vacant,

⁶⁵ *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo* (Second Series), p. 127.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 153-4.

there is no thought, no conception, no mental action of any kind, except an essential perception of things without the formed idea; but in the calm mind, it is the substance of the mental being that is still, so still that nothing disturbs it.... A mind that has achieved this calmness can begin to act, even intensely and powerfully, but it will keep its fundamental stillness — originating nothing from itself but receiving from Above....⁶⁷

Even more pertinent and pointed are the following remarks on the entire futility of suicide:

Suicide is an absurd solution....

Sadhana has to be done in the body, it cannot be done by the soul without the body. When the body drops, the soul goes wandering in other worlds — and finally comes back to another life and another body. Then all the difficulties it had not solved meet it again in the new life. So what is the use of leaving the body?...

The only sensible thing is to face the difficulties in this life and the body and conquer them.⁶⁸

This life, then, is not to be wantonly thrown away, and this body is not to be thoughtlessly allowed to decay before its time. The outer physical is not to be divorced from the inner vital, mental or psychic, and without orderly harmony and organisation the physical cannot be made an efficient and perfect instrument for whatever work one has to do. Changes in outer or physical life, if not dictated by the needs of the inner development but only by the call of external novelty, can hardly lead to any lasting good. As Sri Aurobindo explained in one of his letters:

⁶⁷ *On Yoga II*, Tome One, p. 615. ⁶⁸ *ibid.*, Tome Two, p. 771.

There can be no physical life without an order and rhythm. When this order is changed, it must be in obedience to an inner growth and not for the sake of external novelty. It is only a certain part of the surface lower vital nature which seeks always external change and novelty for its own sake.

It is by a constant inner growth that one can find a constant newness and unfailing interest in life.⁶⁹

The concern one brings to the well-being and efficiency of one's physical body has further to be extended in respect of one's dealings with other physical or material things as well. In handling houses, furniture, machines, cars, and other physical things ever so apparently insignificant, it would be wise to remember that each entity — a chair, a pen, a mirror, a vase, a paper-weight — has its own veiled consciousness, and the avoidance of violence for the sake of violence, of waste as a kind of spendthrift energy, and of carelessness as a sign of dispersion (instead of concentration) of consciousness, should be part of one's sadhana in the physical:

Wanton waste, careless spoiling of physical things in an incredibly short time, loose disorder, misuse of service and materials due either to vital grasping or to tamasic inertia are baneful to prosperity and tend to drive away or discourage the Wealth-Power.... Asceticism for its own sake is not the ideal of this yoga, but self-control in the vital and right order in the material are a very important part of it — and ascetic discipline is better than loose absence of true control.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 689. ⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 690.

One has to learn to use things with the right consciousness — to learn to use, not misuse things; and one has to learn to observe the right measure when going in for even needed essentials like food and sleep if one wants to keep the material base or sheath in efficient trim. “No yoga can be done without sufficient food and sleep”, says Sri Aurobindo and adds: “fasting or sleeplessness make the nerves morbid and excited.... It is the same with everything else”;⁷¹ *mātrā* or measure is most important. The long hours of sleep are not all a period of ‘rest’ but make a nightly Odyssey for a brief return to Ithaca where Penelope is waiting, waiting. and in one letter Sri Aurobindo shows how modern medical theory corroborates occult-spiritual experiences:

A long unbroken sleep is necessary because there are just ten minutes of the whole into which one enters into a true rest — a sort of Sachchidananda immobility of consciousness — and that it is which really restores the system. The rest of the time is spent first in travelling through various states of consciousness towards that and then coming out of it back towards the waking state. This fact of ten minutes true rest has been noted by medical men, but of course they know nothing about Sachchidananda!⁷²

From the waking state to the Sachchidananda state of complete rest, light and silence is a necessary nightly journey, which is however usually disturbed or arrested or reversed before the restorative ten minutes’ period. With most people, the consciousness in the night descends below the level of the waking consciousness. The

⁷¹ *ibid.*, Tome Two, p. 565.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 578.

aim in the yoga is not to rely on sleep alone to give the sadhak the needed ten minutes' *susupti* state of Brahman consciousness, but rather to tune the waking state itself to intensities of seeing and being, and thereby to push consciousness to higher and higher planes and the highest possible. But although one might talk of planes and grades, yet all is one whole arc of consciousness:

In all the series of planes or grades of consciousness there is nowhere any real gulf, always there are connecting gradations and one can ascend from step to step. Between the overmind and the human mind there are a number of more and more luminous gradations; but, as these are superconscious to human mind... it is apt to regard them as a superior Inconscience. So one of the Upanishads speaks of the Ishwara consciousness as *susupti*, deep Sleep, because it is only in Samadhi that man usually enters into it, so long as he does not try to turn his waking consciousness into a higher state.⁷³

The central aim therefore should be to achieve a condition of heightened Brahman consciousness, not in the *sushupti* stage of sleep alone (which is all too brief and all too unpredictable and uncontrollable), nor in the engineered *samādhi* state (which is the total, if temporary, suspension of normal consciousness), but rather in the waking state itself:

...it is in the waking state itself that this realisation must come and endure in order to be a reality of the life. If experienced in trance it would be a superconscious state true for some part of the inner being, but not real to the whole conscious-

⁷³ *ibid.*, Tome One, p. 273.

ness. Experience and trance have their utility for opening the being and preparing it, but it is only when the realisation is constant in the waking state that it is truly possessed. Therefore in this yoga most value is given to the waking realisation and experience.

To work in the calm ever-widening consciousness is at once a sadhana and a siddhi.⁷⁴

Again, just as there are the processes and forces of Yoga to hasten Nature's slow evolutionary endeavour towards the ultimate goal of perfection, there are also the devious movements and undivine forces that conspire to resist and throw back the sadhak during his accelerated march made possible by his Yoga. In everyday life we deal with the normal forces of average human nature — the ordinary vital movements, or the waves from the general Nature, Prakriti. We are exposed to 'desires' and temptations that come with a thousand suggestions from the outside, penetrate to the subconscious vital, and then surge upwards in all their malignancy. While the average man has to deal day by day with this horde of desire-suggestions, the sadhak has to face in addition a set of hostile undivine forces as well. To strive of set purpose to move from the lower egoistic to the higher spiritual life is to provoke these hostile forces, and unless one has the strength to defeat them, the progress in the sadhana must be retarded or rendered impossible. With reference to these 'hostile' forces, Sri Aurobindo writes in the course of some of his letters:

Normal human defects are one thing — they are the working of the lower nature of the Ignorance. The action of the hostile forces is a special inter-

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 715.

vention creating violent inner conflicts, abnormal depressions, thoughts and impulses of a kind which can be easily recognised as suggestions e.g. leaving the Ashram, abandoning the yoga, revolt against the Divine....

The lower nature is ignorant and undivine, not in itself hostile but shut to the Light and Truth. The hostile forces are anti-divine, not merely undivine; they make use of the lower nature, pervert it, fill it with distorted movements and by that means influence man and even try to enter and possess or at least entirely control him.⁷⁵

But even the so-called 'hostile' forces have a function in the larger scheme of things: "it is to test the condition of the individual, of the work, of the earth itself and their readiness for the spiritual descent and fulfilment". The force necessary to enable one to walk on level ground is much less than the force needed to go up-hill, for now the formidable force of gravity also has to be overcome. Ascent in spiritual life involves overcoming the pull of the 'hostile' forces (which are analogous to gravitation, the pull towards the earth), and this could be done by seeking "a greater strength, a more perfect self-knowledge, an intenser purity and force of aspiration, a faith that nothing can crush, a more powerful descent of the Divine Grace".⁷⁶ This is evidently the inner meaning of the stories of demons and other anti-divine forces trying always to prevent the completion of holy *yajñas* or *yāgas* (sacrifices). In the *Ramayana*, for example, Rishi Vishvamitra complains to King Dasharatha that Mareecha, Subahu and their Rakshasa hordes were continually defiling a forest sacrifice in progress by showering unclean

⁷⁵ *On Yoga II*, Tome Two, pp. 795, 796. ⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 797.

flesh and blood on the sacred fire; and Visvamitra seeks the assistance of Prince Rama to checkmate and destroy those hostile forces. It then becomes a part of Rama's avatar-function to respond to the Rishi's appeal, fight and destroy the Rakshasas, and facilitate the completion of the sacrifice. Always when the conscious upward drive is countered by the play and pull of the riot of adverse forces, the call to Divine Grace is alone the sovereign remedy.

One more question: To what extent is predestination an adamant law? If we are to accept the doctrine of Karma — of fate, of destiny, of kismet — of what use is personal effort, and how is one ever going to get out of the endless chain of birth and death and birth again? As always, Sri Aurobindo's answer is pointed as well as reassuring:

Destiny in the rigid sense applies only to the outer being so long as it lives in the Ignorance. What we call destiny is only in fact the result of the present condition of the being and the nature and energies it has accumulated in the past acting on each other and determining the present attempts and their future results. But as soon as one enters the path of spiritual life, this old predetermined destiny begins to recede. There comes in a new factor, the Divine Grace, the help of a higher Divine Force other than the force of Karma, which can lift the sadhak beyond the present possibilities of his nature. One's spiritual destiny is then the divine election which ensures the future.⁷⁷

And more pointed still, and verily ambrosial, is the promise conveyed — albeit mixed with some Aurobindo-

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 849.

nian banter — to his disciple, Nirod:

Whoever was fit, for that matter — fitness and unfitness are only a way of speaking; man is in nature unfit and a misfit (so far as things spiritual are concerned) — in his outward nature. But within there is a soul and above there is Grace. "This is all you know or need to know" and, if you don't, well, even then you have at least somehow stumbled into the path and have got to remain there till you get haled along it far enough to wake up to the knowledge. Amen.⁷⁸

VII

While it was natural that most of his disciples should have ordinarily written to Sri Aurobindo only on the practical difficulties encountered by them or about their perplexities while pursuing the sadhana of the integral Yoga, since nothing human was outside its purview and since it embraced all life, some disciples — notably Dilip, Arjava, Sethna (Amal), Nirod — often raised other questions too. Likewise, in the talks before 24 November 1926 and the resumed talks after 1938, among the subjects that figured were literature, poetry, art, politics, Vedic exegesis, education, psychology, philosophy, religion, war, and even nudity and birth-control, besides of course problems relating to the sadhana. Many of the letters (and the conversations too) have been collected, but many letters also lie scattered in the pages of old journals, and there must also be several letters untraceable or unpublished. A disciple would send some question or other

⁷⁸ *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 121.

for answer, some poem or prose extract for elucidation or comment, and Sri Aurobindo would be "provoked" as it were to giving a beautifully phrased reply redolent of wisdom and learning and wit and humour. What a diversity of themes, and what a variety of approaches! The twelve great masters of style: Aeschylus and Dante: Dante and Shakespeare: Shakespeare and Blake: the poetry of the school of Dryden and Pope: Shelley's *Skylark*: Baudelaire's "vulgarity": Anatole France's "ironising": Walter de la Mare's *Listeners*: five kinds of poetic style: austerity in poetry: architectonics in poetic composition: "great" poetry and merely beautiful poetry: limits of personal vagaries in criticism: relation between length of poems and purity of poetic expression: the unescapable subjective element in all criticism of poetry: the quantitative metre in English: on translating poetry: the place of Bernard Shaw in English literature: the Overmind inspiration in poetry: the poetry of Shahid Suhrawardy, of Amal, of Dilip, of Armando Menezes, of Auden, of Spender, of Hopkins, of Bharati Sarabhai, of Harindranath, of Arjava, of D. H. Lawrence: Planck and the Quantum Theory: Ouspensky: automatic writing: spiritism, ghosts, popular superstitions: Cheiro and Astrology:... indeed, there is no end to the subjects that figure in the letters.

There is not space here to bring out fully through illustrative excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's letters their great range in subject-matter and their variegated richness in tone and style. The scintillating wit, the unobtrusive humour, the unexpected turns of phrase, the sudden Americanisms and colloquialisms, the memorable lightning flashes, the tone of gentle familiarity, all cumulatively reveal a unique power and personality with a

capacity for global understanding and multiple concentration enabling him to write so often, to so many correspondents, on such a variety of themes, and always with sureness, lightness, pellucid clarity and seeming finality. Here are a few lines, as it were carelessly dashed off, and yet they succeed in weighing Goethe against Shakespeare with an admirable percipience:

Yes, Goethe goes much deeper than Shakespeare; he had an incomparably greater intellect than the English poet and sounded problems of life and thought Shakespeare had no means of approaching even. But he was certainly not a greater poet; I do not find myself very ready to admit either that he was Shakespeare's equal. He wrote out of a high poetic intelligence, but his style and movement nowhere came near the poetic power, the magic, the sovereign expression and profound or subtle rhythms of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was a supreme poet and one might almost say, nothing else; Goethe was by far the greater man and the greater brain, but he was a poet by choice, his mind's choice among its many high and effulgent possibilities, rather than by the very necessity of his being. He wrote his poetry as he did everything else with a great skill and an inspired subtlety of language and effective genius, but it was only part of his genius and not the whole. There is too a touch mostly wanting — the touch of an absolute, an intensely inspired or revealing inevitability; few quite supreme poets have that in abundance, in others it comes by occasional jets or flashes.⁷⁹

Equally illuminating is the distinction Sri Aurobindo

⁷⁹ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series (1949), pp. 305-6.

draws, in the course of the same letter, between Vyasa and Valmiki on the one hand and Homer and Shakespeare on the other. In another letter, Sri Aurobindo elaborates the point that, although in the Yogin's vision of universal beauty, all is indeed beautiful, yet all cannot be reduced to a uniform level:

There are gradations, there is a hierarchy, in this All-Beauty.... In the artist's vision too there are or can be gradations, a hierarchy of values. Shakespeare can get dramatic and therefore aesthetic values out of Dogberry and Malvolio and he is as thorough a creative artist in his treatment of them as in his handling of Macbeth and Lear. But if we had only Dogberry or Malvolio to testify to Shakespeare's genius, no Macbeth, no Lear, would he be so great a dramatic artist and creator as he now is? It is in the varying possibilities of one subject or another that there lies an immense difference. Apelles' grapes deceived the birds that came to peck at them, but there was more aesthetic content in the Zeus of Phidias....⁸⁰

Or he can, in the course of a few lines, balance the merits of Albert Samain's poem *Pannyre aux talons d'or* as against those of Flecker's English translation of the same poem:

Samain's poem is a fine piece of work, inspired and perfect; Flecker's is good only in substance, an adequate picture, one may say.... The difference is that the French has vision and the inspired movement that comes with vision — all on the vital plane, of course — but the English version has only physical sight, sometimes with a little glow in it,

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, First Series, pp. 413-4.

and the precision that comes with that sight.... But both these poems have the distinction of being perfectly satisfying in their own kind.⁸¹

And here, in a few lines, Sri Aurobindo sums up the quality of Donne's poetry and the reason why it appeals to the modern mind:

Donne's ingenuities remain intellectual and do not get alive except at times, the vital fire or force is not there to justify them.... Energy and force of a kind he has, but it is twisted, laboured, something that has not found itself. That is why he is not so great a poet as he might have been. He is admired today because the modern mind has become like his — it too is straining for energy and force without having the life-impulse necessary for a true vividness and verve nor that higher vision which would supply another kind of energy — its intellect too is twisted, laboured, not in possession of itself.⁸²

And when a correspondent tried to put a highly philosophical and mystical interpretation on Shakespeare's "We are such stuff as dreams are made on....", Sri Aurobindo's comment was: "One can read anything into anything... Shakespeare's idea here as everywhere is the expression of a mood of the vital mind, it is not a reasoned philosophical conclusion".⁸³

Psycho-analysis figures in the talks as well as in the correspondence. Once in 1925 Sri Aurobindo seems to

⁸¹ *Life-Literature-Yoga*, pp. 188-9. ⁸² *ibid.*, p. 180.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 222. For a full discussion the reader is referred to *Sri Aurobindo on Shakespeare* (1965), in which K. D. Sethna has brought together, with a commentary of his own, the numerous insights and critical observations of Sri Aurobindo scattered mainly in his letters.

have referred to the theory of one Major Hill ("fit to be an inmate of a lunatic asylum") that the entire Hindu-Muslim problem was due to the "cow-complex"⁸⁴; on another occasion, Sri Aurobindo remarked how surprising it was that even some of the best intellectuals accepted psycho-analysis.⁸⁵ And here in one of his letters he admirably twits the psycho-analyst's complacent pretensions:

I find it difficult to take these psycho-analysts at all seriously when they try to scrutinise spiritual experience by the flicker of their torch-lights, — yet perhaps one ought to, for half-knowledge is a powerful thing and can be a great obstacle to the coming in front of the true Truth. This new psychology looks to me very much like children learning some summary and not very adequate alphabet, exulting in putting their a-b-c-d of the subconscious and the mysterious underground super-ego together and imagining that their first book of obscure beginnings (c-a-t cat, t-r-e-e tree) is the very heart of the real knowledge. They look from down up and explain the higher lights by the lower obscurities; but the foundation of these things is above and not below. *upari budhna eṣām*. The superconscient, not the subconscious, is the true foundation of things. The significance of the lotus is not to be found by analysing the secrets of the mud from which it grows here; its secret is to be found in the heavenly archetype of the lotus that blooms for

⁸⁴ *Evening Talks*, Second Series, p. 180.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, First Series, p. 115; also Nirodbaran, *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, p. 239.

ever in the Light above.⁸⁶

The case against a too ready acceptance of psycho-analysis cannot be put more concisely or incisively.

Sri Aurobindo had certainly little in common with the popular conception of a Yogi — a self-absorbed ecstatic far removed from the madding crowd and its interests and illusions and involvements. He was in his own way in the very thick of the world's happenings, trying a spiritual action to influence men and affairs; and when his disciples ventured to prod him as it were, they were invariably surprised by his uncanny knowledge of the minutiae as also of the broad outlines of the developing world situation. When somebody pointed out that a particular nation had been seized with lunacy, Sri Aurobindo promptly wrote back:

Seized with lunacy? But this implies that the nation is ordinarily led by reason. Is it so? Or even by common sense? Masses of men act upon their vital push, not according to reason: individuals too do the same. If they call in their reason, it is as a lawyer to plead the vital's cause.⁸⁷

In another letter, he stressed the importance of humour:

Sense of humour? It is the salt of existence. Without it the world would have got utterly out of balance — it is unbalanced enough already — and rushed to blazes long ago.⁸⁸

And sometimes Sri Aurobindo's humour sprouts and sparkles like a fountain in the sunshine, and there is no resisting its infectious gaiety, its sheer fascination. In these letters wisdom mingles with lightness and sanity

⁸⁶ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, First Series, pp. 412-4.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Dilip's *Suryamukhi*, p. 411.

⁸⁸ *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 599.

with humour and all blend in the right measure and hue:

Don't aspire for two days and then go into the dumps, evolving a gospel of earthquake and Schopenhauer plus the ass and all the rest of it. Give the Divine a sporting chance. When he lights something in you or is preparing a light, don't come in with a wet blanket of despondency and throw it on the poor flame.⁸⁹

Wells, Chesterton, Shaw and others joust at each other like the *kabiwalas* of old Calcutta, though with more refined weapons, and you cannot take their humorous sparrings as considered appreciations; if you do, you turn exquisite jests into solemn nonsense.⁹⁰

Well, well, this is the bare, rocky, direct poetry? God help us! This is the sort of thing to which theories lead even a man of genius.⁹¹

On one occasion, somebody who signed himself 'Aurobindo, Bombay' wired for permission to attend a *darśan* and gave Dilip's name for reference. Dilip promptly wrote a Bengali poem describing four possible identities, and this at once elicited a marvellous reply from the Master:

Dilip, your epic of four Aurobindos is luminous, informing and hair-raising. But there can be no doubt about who this Aurobindo is — it is, I presume, Aurobindo the fourth, "a doer of dreadful deeds"... what I am doing is to shove my responsibility on your shoulders.... To sum the matter up

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 341. ⁹⁰ *ibid.*, Third Series, p. 334.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 321. (The reference is to a passage in D. H. Lawrence's *Pansies*)

in two far-flowing Alexandrine couplets:

Tell him, by wire: 'Come on' with a benignant nod,
Or leave him journeying to the devil or to God,
Decide for the other Aurobindo what you please,
This namesake-flooded Aurobindo leave at ease.⁹²

Again, when Dilip hit his head against a door, he received as compensation this priceless piece of epistolary art:

You struck your head against the upper sill of the door our engineer Chandulal fixed in your room? A pity, no doubt. But remember that Chandulal's dealings with the door *qua* door were scientifically impeccable: the only thing he forgot was that people — of various sizes — should pass through it... our Lilliputian engineer perhaps measured things by his own head, forgetting that there were in the Ashram higher heads and broader shoulders.... As for the Divine rapture, a knock on the head or foot or elsewhere can be received with the physical *ānanda* of pain or pain and *ananda* or pure physical *ānanda* — for I have often, quite involuntarily, made the experiment myself and passed with honours. It began, by the way, as far back as in Alipur Jail when I got bitten in my cell by some very red and ferocious-looking warrior ants, and found to my surprise that pain and pleasure are conventions of our senses.⁹³

Now and then, Sri Aurobindo could enter even more fully into the spirit of the disciple's ruling sensibility and make almost a duet of the question-and-answer in the best tradition of the comic theatre:

Nirod. I can't rush up again till August 15 — the

⁹² *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 155. ⁹³ *ibid.*, pp. 123-4.

next *darśan*. Will you kindly come down and help the poor amateur Yogi?

Sri Aurobindo. Come down? into Erebus? No, thank you.... But why hug despair, without a cause — Dilipian or other? Come to your senses and develop a Nirodian jollity instead.... Laugh and be fat — then dance to keep the fat down — that is a sounder programme.⁹¹

This was in February 1935; then, some ten months later:

Nirod. I am thrown out of joint at two miracles... though Madam Doubt still peeps from behind. Anyhow, no chance for me! Kismet, Sir? What to do?

Sri Aurobindo. Why out of joint? It ought to strengthen your joints for the journey of Yoga. Not at all, sir. Mind, sir, mind. Madam Doubt, sir, Madam Doubt! Miss Material Intellectualism, sir! Aunt Despondency, sir! Uncle Self-distrust, sir! Cousin Self-depreciation, sir! The whole confounded family, sir!⁹²

And for a final example, when a disciple wrote to Sri Aurobindo in 1936 that he had struck Paul Brunton as a Chinese sage, and the disciple himself as a King of the Hungarian gypsies, swiftly came the answer:

Confucius? Lao-Tse? Mencius? Hang-whang-pu? (Don't know who the last was, but his name sounds nice.) Can't remember anything about it. As for the Hungarian gypsy, I suppose we must have been everything at one time or another, on this earth in some other cycle. But I am not aware of

⁹¹ *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 108.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 274.

any particularly Magyar or Chinese element in me. However, when I came here, I was told I looked just like a Tamil sannyasi and some Christians said I was just like Christ. So it may be.

More seriously, Brunton seems to have thought I was Lao-Tse. Maybe, I can't say it is impossible."⁹⁶

⁹⁶ *Life-Literature-Yoga*, p. 2. For further instances of Sri Aurobindo's humour, the reader is referred to Nirodbaran's *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo Part II (Humour)*. 1972.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

POET OF YOGA

I

While examining the implications of Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Future, we saw how the probable divinisation of man the individual—the emergence of the Gnostic being—will necessarily inspire his immediate environment leading to a better social order and also accelerate the urge towards the realisation of global human unity. But the new Man would also evolve his own theory of poetry and of art in general, and the poetry and art of the Gnostic Age must have their own distinguishing vitality and significance. Here, again, Sri Aurobindo's contributions—as futurist critic no less than as futurist poet—will form no mean foundations on which the edifices of the future may be safely and greatly reared.

The refreshingly stimulating series of articles that Sri Aurobindo contributed to the *Arya* from December 1917 to August 1920 under the general caption 'The Future Poetry' began as a critical review of Dr. James H. Cousins's *New Ways in English Literature*. The review, however, was only a starting-point. The rest was drawn from Sri Aurobindo's ideas and his already conceived view of Art and Life. And, ultimately, the "review" became a treatise of thirty-two chapters, and has since been posthumously issued as a book. We learn from the Publishers' Note that Sri Aurobindo had intended revising the series of articles so as to give them the form of a book, and he had also planned to add a few more

chapters, including one on the Metaphysical Poets. But actually he could write only a few supplementary paragraphs here and there, and these have now been incorporated in their proper places in the published volume (1953).

What sort of work is this 400-page book, *The Future Poetry*? Literary history, aesthetic criticism, appreciations of individual English poets classical and modern, speculations on the future of poetry in general and of English poetry in particular, discussions on themes like "The Essence of Poetry", "Rhythm and Movement", "Style and Substance", "Poetic Vision and the Mantra", "The Ideal Spirit of Poetry", "The Sun of Poetic Truth", "The Soul of Poetic Delight and Beauty" and "the Word and the Spirit", all these are thrown into the melting pot, and the result is a fascinating adventure in creative understanding, — an unconventional but truly prophetic work of criticism embodying the manifesto of the new "overhead aesthesis".

Sri Aurobindo was a seer rather than a coldly rationalist practitioner of literary criticism, and accordingly he doesn't laboriously or intellectually formulate a scheme for the future; he merely glimpses the very head and front, and he seems to feel the very heart-beats, of the Future Poetry — and for the nonce we too see with his eyes and hear with his ears. Characteristically does he call the series of articles, not "The Future of Poetry", but simply "The Future Poetry"; it is a thing as good as decreed — even as the Supramental Descent is an event preordained and inevitable — that the future poetry should partake of the nature of the *mantra*, "that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home

of the Truth".¹ In his book, Cousins himself had speculated on the possibility of the discovery of the word, the rhythm, the configuration of thought proper to the reality which "lies in the apprehension of a something stable behind the instability of word and deed, something that is a reflection of the fundamental passion of humanity for something beyond itself, something that is a dim foreshadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards its Godlike possibilities".² Such *mantric* poetry had no doubt found occasional utterance — in lightning flashes or luminous radiations — in the past; but Sri Aurobindo's inquiry is whether the *mantra* could become for the future poet "a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour", whether it could become the rule and not merely the rare exception.

After laying down the quintessential law that the true creator — as also the true hearer — of poetry is the soul, Sri Aurobindo maintains that the poetic word acquires its extraordinary intensity and evocative power because "it comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word".³ Words in poetry are not just words picked at random from a dictionary and joined together somehow. Although words are nowadays written or printed and hence catch the eye, words were not always written or printed, and words in poetry are not really meant to be only seen or read. Words are often spoken, and they are then heard by the human ear; but words need neither be spoken by the human mouth nor heard by the human ear. What, then, is the true content of the poetic word? It does have a particular look when written or

¹ *The Future Poetry* (1953), p. 11.

² *ibid.*, quoted on p. 11. ³ *ibid.*, p. 22.

printed, it does convey a particular sound to the ear, it does communicate something akin to an idea to the mind; but the word is more than what it looks and what it sounds and what it seems to mean. The poetic word is verily a symbol, it is a wave that floats in the ocean of Eternity, sometimes carrying a whisper from God to man and sometimes a prayer from man to God. Any word has a fairly definitive denotation, and it could also acquire an almost limitless connotation, a potency and mystery and magic of its own. The true poetic word thus strives to catch the inward eye, to reach the inward ear, and to sink into the deeper profundities of the awakening or awakened soul. The real aim of the arts — architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry — is to speak to the spirit of man through meaningful images, and only the media vary in the different arts, the poet's being the word that is charged with power and purpose. Most people are content to live in the outer mind and senses, but the aim of art and especially of poetry is to help us to live in the soul, to enable us to see into the utter truth of things. And the poet has to find the words and the rhythm that would achieve this aim:

He is, as the ancients knew, a seer and not merely a maker of rhymes, not merely a jongleur, rhapsodist or troubadour, and not merely a thinker in lines and stanzas. He sees beyond the sight of the surface mind and finds the revealing word, not merely the adequate and effective, but the illumined and illuminating, the inspired and inevitable word, which compels us to see also. To arrive at that word is the whole endeavour of poetic style.⁴

To see the truth of the life in the soul and to convey

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 33.

this truth, the right words in the right order or rhythm are needed. Just as the poetic word is much more than the Dictionary word, the poetic rhythm too is much more than the regular metrical beat: it has to try to "bring out an echo of hidden harmonies, a secret of rhythmical infinities within us".⁵ Since the purpose of poetry is to *see* and make others *see*, "Vision" is the poet's essential native endowment, and the *mantra* his means to reach the *sahjādaya* and make him also share the vision:

Vision is the characteristic power of the poet, as is discriminative thought the essential gift of the philosopher and analytic observation the natural genius of the scientist. The Kavi was in the idea of the ancients the seer and revealer of truth.... Therefore the greatest poets have been always those who have had a large and powerful interpretative and intuitive vision of Nature and life and man and whose poetry has arisen out of that in a supreme revelatory utterance of it."

The poet's is not just a view of life — intellectual, philosophical, political, sociological — but a direct vision or soul-view of life, "a seizing by the inner sense"; and the *mantra* is not a matter of sound-recording only but the rhythmic transmission of the soul's sight of God and Nature and the world to the receptive soul. But Sri Aurobindo adds that "this does not depend only on the individual power of vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment".⁷ A poet, even a very great poet, is to a considerable extent the product of his age; and he

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 29. ⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 39-40. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 50.

too is implicated in its limitations, even as he is heir to its possibilities. He is also a representative of his race, of his nation, of his people; he is a flower that blooms upon that tree, that branch, out of those leaves, — he cannot wholly tear himself away from his bases:

The soul of the poet may be like a star and dwell apart; even, his work may seem not merely a variation from but a revolt against the limitations of the national mind. But still the roots of his personality are there in its spirit and even his variation and revolt are an attempt to bring out something that is latent and suppressed or at least something which is trying to surge up from the secret all-soul into the soul-form of the nation.⁵

Sri Aurobindo devotes the next few chapters to a survey of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon to our own times. It is no academic history, however; it is a personal, temperamental, quintessential survey lighted up everywhere by a sovereign understanding and glowing with the warmth of life. Everywhere one comes across the unfailing intuition into the real nature of poetry, the genius for seizing and stating the utter truth, the infallible sixth sense for detecting sound values and delicate movements in rhythm, and the mastery of language that weaves derogation and appreciation, criticism and prophecy, illustration and generalisation into a captivating fabric of sinuous and enchanting prose. Sri Aurobindo begins his survey by subscribing to the general opinion that of all the modern European tongues the English language "has produced the most rich and naturally powerful poetry, the most lavish of energy and innate genius".⁶ After two chapters on the "character" of English poetry — chapters

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 59. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 60.

that are very perceptive and bring out both the cardinal virtues and the still thwarted purposings of English poetry — Sri Aurobindo starts assessing, with the same sustained insight and weight of authority, the work of some of the greater or more well-known English poets. We have no space here to refer to or comment upon the several individual estimates, each with its own percipience, crystalline phrasing and air of judicial finality, but one or two at least deserve to be sampled here. Thus, for example, about Chaucer:

Chaucer has his eye fixed on the object, and that object is the external action of life as it passes before him throwing its figures on his mind and stirring it to a kindly satisfaction in the movement and its interest, to a blithe sense of humour or a light and easy pathos. He does not seek to add anything to it or to see anything below it or behind its outsides, nor does he look at all into the souls or deeply into the minds of the men and women whose appearance, action and easily apparent traits of character he describes with so apt and observant a fidelity. He does not ask himself what is the meaning of all this movement of life or the power in it or draw any large poetic idea from it: he is not moved to interpret life, a clear and happy presentation is his business... neither his poetic speech nor his rhythm has anything of the plastic greatness and high beauty of the Italians. It is an easy, limpid and flowing movement, a stream rather than a well, — for it has no depths in it, — of pure English utterance just fitted for the clear and pleasing poetic presentation of external life as if in an unsullied mirror, at times rising into an apt and pointed

expression, but for the most part satisfied with a first primitive power of poetic speech, a subdued and well-tempered even adequacy. Only once or twice does he by accident strike out a really memorable line of poetry; yet Dante and Petrarch were among his masters.¹⁰

Of the Elizabethans. Sri Aurobindo writes with total understanding, and no more than a few sentences are enough to fix Shakespeare and his lesser contemporaries in their proper relationships:

The great magician, Shakespeare, by his marvelous poetic rendering of life and the spell his poetry casts upon us, conceals this general inadequacy; the whole age which he embodies is magnified by his presence.... Shakespeare is an exception, a miracle of poetic force; he survives untouched all adverse criticism, not because there are not plenty of fairly large spots in this sun, but because in any complete view of him they disappear in the greatness of his light. Spenser and Marlowe are poets of a high order, great in spite of an eventual failure. But the rest owe their stature to an uplifting power in the age and not chiefly to their own intrinsic height of genius: and that power had many vices, flaws and serious limitations which their work exaggerates wilfully rather than avoids. The gold of this golden age of English poetry is often very beautifully and richly wrought, but it is seldom worked into a perfect artistic whole; it disappears continually in masses of alloy, and there is on the whole more of a surface gold-dust than of the deeper yield of the human spirit.¹¹

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 83-5. ¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

Generous in appreciation but not blind to the dark spots, his eyes uncannily observant enough but not so as to miss the woods in the twisted, fallen or darkened trees, Sri Aurobindo's criticism is unexceptionable indeed. As with the Elizabethans, with Milton too — and notably with *Paradise Lost* — Sri Aurobindo merely holds the mirror up to the man and his work, and the high magnificent face is caught in it and so are the warts:

Paradise Lost is assuredly a great poem.... Rhythm and speech have never attained to a mightier amplitude of epic expression and movement, seldom to an equal sublimity.... His aim too is high, his subject loftier than that of any one of his predecessors except Dante.... To justify the ways of God to man intellectually is not the province of poetry; what it can do, is to reveal them. Yet just here is the point of failure. Milton has seen Satan and Death and Sin and Hell and Chaos; there is a Scriptural greatness in his account of these things: he has not so seen God and heaven and man or the soul of humanity at once divine and fallen, subject to evil and striving for redemption; here there is no inner greatness in the poetic interpretation of his materials. In other words, he has ended by stumbling over the rock of offence that always awaits poetry... the fatal danger of a failure of vision.¹²

There is then a hurried but meaningful glance at the poets and poetry of the eighteenth century, followed by a grand swerving movement bridging the old and the new, and on the threshold of the Romantic Age we meet with thrilled excitement the "Poets of the Dawn".

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 117-9.

In these pages, Sri Aurobindo is more than ever in his element, his touch was never surer, or the brush-strokes clearer. Here, for example, Byron and Wordsworth are snapped together as it were:

Byron and Wordsworth are the two poets who are most hampered by this difficulty of finding and keeping to the native speech of their greater self, most often depressed in their elevation, because they are both drawn by a strong side of their nature, the one to a forceful, the other to a weighty intellectualised expression; neither of them born singers or artists of word and sound... but doubled here by a man of action and passion, there by a moralist and preacher... both in the deepest centre or on the highest peak of their inspiration are moved by powers for which their heavily or forcibly intellectualised language of poetry was no adequate means. It is only when they escape from it that they do their rare highest work. Byron, no artist, intellectually shallow and hurried, a poet by compulsion of personality rather than in the native colour of his mind, inferior in all these respects to the finer grain of his great contemporaries, but in compensation a more powerful elemental force than any of them and more in touch with all that had begun to stir in the mind of the time.... Wordsworth, meditative, inward, concentrated in his thought, is more often able by force of brooding to bring out that voice of his greater self, but flags constantly, brings in a heavier music surrounding his few great clear tones, drowns his genius at last in a desolate sea of platitude. Neither arrives at that amplitude of achievement which might have been theirs in a

more fortunate time, if ready forms had been given to them, or if they had lived in the stimulating atmosphere of a contemporary culture harmonious with their personality.¹³

Mark the subtle variations, the suggestive qualifications, the many parentheses on the way; mark too how in such masterly appraisements comparative criticism acquires a convincing fervour and finality. And *The Future Poetry* is full of such perceptive pieces of critical analysis and appreciation that could have been turned out only by the creative force of a truly plenary understanding.

The chapter on the Victorian Poets concentrates on the big three — Tennyson, Browning and Arnold — and then follow four chapters on “Recent English Poetry”, the focus of interest being on Whitman, Carpenter, Tagore, A.E., Phillips and W.B. Yeats, all of whom were “recent poets” enough over fifty years ago when these articles were contributed to the *Arya*. Whitman is not unreasonably given the largest amount of space, and Sri Aurobindo interprets his poetry and his art with perception as well as with an understandable gusto. One of the most eloquent and illuminating passages in the whole book is the one in which Sri Aurobindo elaborates an unexpected, but not unconvincing, comparison between Homer and Whitman:

Whitman’s aim is consciently, clearly, professedly to make a great revolution in the whole method of poetry, and if anybody could have succeeded, it ought to have been this giant of poetic thought with his energy of diction, this spiritual crowned athlete and vital prophet of democracy, liberty and the soul of man and Nature and all humanity....

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 165-7.

His is the most Homeric voice since Homer, in spite of the modern's ruder, less elevated aesthesis of speech and the difference between that limited Olympian and this broad-souled Titan, in this that he has the nearness to something elemental which makes everything he says, even the most common and prosaic, sound out with a ring of greatness, gives a force even to his barest or heaviest phrases, throws even upon the coarsest, dullest, most physical things something of the divinity; and he has the elemental Homeric power of sufficient straightforward speech, the rush too of oceanic sound though it is here the surging of the Atlantic between continents, not the magic roll and wash of the Aegean around the isles of Greece. What he has not is the unfailing poetic beauty and nobility which saves greatness from its defects — that supreme gift of Homer and Valmiki — and the self-restraint and obedience to a divine law which makes even the gods more divine.¹⁴

Sri Aurobindo wrote these articles before the work of Hopkins, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Auden and the later Yeats achieved publication, and even as regards the poetry of Meredith, Phillips, A. E. and Yeats, Sri Aurobindo had mainly to depend on the quotations in Cousins's book. With all these limitations, however, Sri Aurobindo has been able to notice certain trends, certain possibilities, and get almost something of a faint foretaste of the future poetry. He sees a kind of push or straining — obscure yet, and feeble, though also unmistakable — a straining towards new horizons:

And what it must lead to in the end if it does

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 211-2.

get to its end... must be some direct seeing by the soul of the soul or self everywhere in its own delivered force of vision, — the direct vision of Indian aspiration, *ātmani atmanam ātmanā*. — not the sensuous or the imaginative or the intellectual or the vital insistence, but a greater Potency using and surmounting them, the Soul's own delivered self-vision in all things and delight of its own greatness and light and beauty.¹⁵

English poetry has had its vicissitudes, a supreme crest of achievement in Shakespeare, then a decline and an undulating flow; but Sri Aurobindo sees in "more recent verse" an attempt at the recovery of a commanding power of speech. Shakespeare yet remains the out-topping name in English poetry, but there is still no reason why the next wave shouldn't carry poetry to higher points of achievement than even Shakespeare's. Sri Aurobindo finds in Meredith and Phillips vague hints of a new voice, and in the Irish poets, A. E. and Yeats, something more too: an intimation of the filiations between man's earthly life and the unseen psychical life; an intimation of an ideal eternal Beauty beyond the real and the evanescent; and an insinuation of finer soul-values through the façade of material actualities.

Having thus brilliantly surveyed the broad spans and the luminous crests in the course of English poetry from the Anglo-Saxons and Chaucer to Whitman and Yeats, Sri Aurobindo turns to the probabilities of the future. "We can see where we stand today", he says, "but we cannot tell where we shall stand a quarter of a century hence".¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo nevertheless believed that the day was not far off when the rendition of the veil that

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 227. ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 279.

obscures the mental vision would be accomplished at last and the new poet would hymn his songs in the voice of the innermost spirit and truth of things:

An intuitive revealing poetry of the kind which we have in view would voice a supreme harmony of five eternal powers, Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit. These are indeed the five greater ideal lamps or rather the five suns of poetry....

The poetry of the future, if it fulfils in amplitude the promise now only there in rich tint, will kindle these five lamps of our being... make them not any longer lamps in some limited temple of beauty, but suns in the heavens of our highest mind and illuminative of our widest as well our inmost life. It will be a poetry of a new largest vision of himself and Nature and God....¹⁷

Sri Aurobindo devotes the next few chapters to a more detailed consideration of the 'five powers' — Truth, Life, Beauty, Delight and the Spirit — that should inhabit, inform and forge the harmony of the future poetry. What is Truth? What is the "Sun of Poetic Truth"? Sri Aurobindo doesn't flinch from the task of answering the question:

Truth, as she is seen by us in the end, is an infinite goddess, the very front and face of Infinity and Aditi herself, the illimitable mother of all the gods. This infinite and eternally creative Truth is no enemy of imagination or even of fancy.... Now it is something of this infinite Truth which poetry succeeds in giving us with a high power, in its own way of beauty, by its own opulent appointed means.¹⁸

To seize beauty at the soul's level of apprehension, to

¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 286, 291. ¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 296-7.

thrill with delight in contemplation of this beauty, this is not given to everybody; a leap of intuition, a surge of inspiration is called for. "The poet", says Sri Aurobindo, "his eyes fixed on life, shows us as if by accident the seed in our normal nature which can grow into the prodigious spiritual truth of universal love".¹⁹ The Sun of Poetic Truth is a phosphorescent splendour, beauty and delight in an ecstasy of wedded bliss, but it is not knowledge, nor teaching, nor doctrine. And the "life" on which the Sun of Poetic Truth should shine is not the complex of outward actualities alone but, more importantly, all — all the invisible worlds below and above — that may lie behind our apparent material life:

What man sees and experiences of God and himself and his race and Nature and the spiritual, mental, psychic and material worlds in which he moves, his backlook upon the past, his sweep of vision over the present, his eye of aspiration and prophecy cast towards the future, his passion of self-finding and self-exceeding, his reach beyond the three times to the eternal and immutable, this is his real life.²⁰

Such a total or integral vision of life would not reduce the actuality of our earthly life but heighten it rather, and make it "more real and rich and full and wide and living to men".²¹ The Sun of Poetic Truth shining on the Greater life — which is also the totality and oneness of life — sees in it the soul of Beauty and thrills with Delight at the sheer *rasa* or quintessential aesthesis of this discovery:

But this Ananda, this delight, this aesthesis which is the soul of poetic beauty works like other things,

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 305. ²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 325. ²¹ *ibid.*, p. 328.

like poetic truth or the poetic breath of life on different levels, in different provinces of its actions with the same law that we have observed in the rest, of the emergence of a richer and profounder face of itself the more it gets inward and upward from the less to the more occult powers of its revelation.²²

It was Sri Aurobindo's conviction that the new or the awakened man of the future would not be satisfied with the pleasures of the senses or of the intellect, and would demand something deeper, truer, and less evanescent, something allied to the deeper beauty and delight of Existence, something partaking of the *rasa* or taste of the Bliss of Brahman. Already the latter-day poets of our time had rebelled against and tried to break through the bounds — relating to the choice of theme, language, form and rhythm — accepted by the poets of the past. But mere uncharted freedom, unaccompanied by a new wide range and great intensity of vision, would accomplish but little. Total freedom from all restraints would be viable only when it was based on a total identification with the power of the Spirit:

The one thing that man sees above the intellect is the spirit, and therefore the developed intellect of the race, if it is at all to go forward, must open now to an understanding and seeing spirituality other than the rather obscure religionism of the past... an illumined self-knowledge and God-knowledge and a world-knowledge too which, transmuted in that greater light, will spiritualise the whole view and motive of our existence.²³

A new poetry of the spirit that has shattered the older

²² *ibid.*, p. 344. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 352.

poetic 'forms' would still have to work towards the evolution of new forms: no superimposed 'forms' now, but 'forms' that are the natural expression of the spirit in its each individual movement. Lyric, drama, epic, all would suffer a change, but this change will have to be brought about from within; and the lyrics, dramas, epics of the soul would thus take the place of the traditional genres. Like the 'form', the verbal expression too must change so as to keep pace with the change in intention and spirit:

It will be the language of a higher intuitive mind swallowing up the intellectual tones into the closeness and identities of a supra-intellectual light and Ananda.... The voice of poetry comes from a region above and beyond our personal intelligence, a supermind which sees things in their innermost and largest truth by a spiritual identity and with a lustrous effulgency and rapture and its native language is a revelatory, inspired, intuitive word limpid or subtly vibrant or densely packed with the glory of this ecstasy and lustre.²⁴

In the concluding chapter, Sri Aurobindo gathers the sinuous silken threads of the discussion into a reasoned statement of recent trends and future probabilities. The intellectual idea of man's unity with man and man's intimate relationship with Nature, the psychic responses and experiences on the basis of this intellectual idea, and experiments in the use of language elastic and powerful enough for the expression or recordation of the idea and the responses and the experiences, — these things some of the "recent" poets had given us indeed; but for the trend to culminate in a complete fulfilment, something

²⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 392-3.

more was needed, "the pouring of a new and greater self-vision of man and Nature and existence into the idea and the life".²⁵ The idea and the response and the experience had also to pass into an integral spiritual realisation, thereby imprinting themselves in the deeper consciousness of the race and acquiring a natural and general currency in everyday human thought and feeling.

The signal for the start of the aesthetic inquiry, the intuitive enunciation of poetic theory, the careful examination of the evidence, the uncanny inductive reasoning, the legitimate conclusions regarding the "recent" trends, the prognostication about the future: there is in all this the entire unfoldment of the "scientific method", and hence *The Future Poetry* deserves to be described as a scientific treatise doubled with an emanation of prophecy. It is all of a piece with Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical, sociological and political speculations: man must change, his world must change, society must change, world polity must change, and art and poetry must change — one change inevitably leading to or linked with the other changes, and all cumulatively ushering in the new heaven and the new earth of our inspired imaginings. The same honoured place that the *Poetics* holds among the works of Aristotle — "the Master of those who know", as Dante describes him — *The Future Poetry* holds in the total Aurobindonian canon. The *Arya* sequences all hang together like the many continents comprising our global habitation, and these treatises are but the divers shining facets of the marvellous single diamond beyond price. The necessary dynamic of the Aurobindonian *Weltanschauung* was the decisive drift from the egoistic

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 404.

or merely individualistic to the universal or cosmic consciousness, and it was Sri Aurobindo's firm view that this should apply as much to the future poetry as to the future man or the future society or polity:

It is in effect a larger cosmic vision, a realising of the godhead in the world and in man, of his divine possibilities as well of the greatness of the power that manifests in what he is, a spiritualised uplifting of his thought and feeling and sense and action, a more developed psychic mind and heart, a truer and a deeper insight into his nature and the meaning of the world, a calling of diviner potentialities and more spiritual values into the intention and structure of his life that is the call upon humanity....²⁶

It is this spiritual realisation that the future poetry has to help forward by giving to it its eye of sight, its shape of aesthetic beauty, its revealing tongue, and it is this greatening of life that it has to make its substance.²⁷

II

At no period of his life was Sri Aurobindo unaware of the spiritual reality behind the material actuality. Never did he countenance either of the classic negations, the denial of the materialist or the refusal of the ascetic. In some of the philosophical poems discussed in the chapter 'Musa Spiritus', there are doubtless intimations

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 406. ²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 405-6.

of an intellectually formulated world-view, but this is merely ancillary or antecedent to the satisfying world-view to be reared on the sure foundations of his mystic or Yogic experiences. The section entitled 'Nine Poems' in the second volume of *Collected Poems and Plays* occupies a roughly middle place in the evolution of Sri Aurobindo's poetic art, and several of the poems have been discussed already. By far the most ambitious and the most nobly evocative of 'Nine Poems' is *Ahana*, in rhymed hexameters. Although first published in 1915, it was probably written some years earlier; it could therefore be looked upon as somewhat of a palimpsest, a convenient bridge between the imaginative and sensuously evocative poet of *Urvashi* and *Love and Death* on the one hand and the yogin-singer of *The Rose of God* and the futurist bard of *Savitri*. The poem now included in the collected edition is a revised and enlarged version of what had appeared in 1915, and it has received an accession of new light and weight of thought that sets the poem apart as almost an Aurobindonian poetic encyclopaedia in dazzling miniature.²⁸

The earlier (1915) version, *The Descent of Ahana*, now included in Volume 5 (*Collected Poems*) of the Centenary Library edition, was in two Parts, both in dialogue form. In the first Part, Ahana is shown as being apparently reluctant to return from her transcendent retreat to the turbulent ways and wants of the world. The Voices of the Earth, however, who are Ancients of Knowledge and Sons of the Morning, tell her that she cannot choose but submit to the prayers and purposes of the world. Imperfect it may be, but the

²⁸ The reader is referred, for a fuller discussion, to the present writer's article on *Ahana* in the *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Third Number (1947).

earth carries the seeds of perfection; joyless it may be, but it is instinct with the potentiality of bliss; and the earthly rose is yet capable of the forms, colours and perfumes of the Rose of Heaven. "Come, come down to us", the Voices cry. But Ahana is the mighty goddess, she is Ashtarooh, she is Aphrodite. What need for her, then, to return to the earth? What attractions there, what compensations? In answer, the Voices raise a compulsive chorus, greeting her as Diana, Usha, Delight, Latona, Yakshini, Gandharvi, Durga, hundred-ecstasied Woman, Daughter of Heaven, and her descent is peremptorily invoked:

Come from thy summits, Ahana, come! Our desire
unrelenting
Hales thee down from God and He smiles at thee
sweetly consenting.
Lo, she is hurried down and the regions live in her
tresses.

Worlds, she descends to you!

"Calm like a goddess, alarmed like a bride", Ahana is in readiness to descend, though not actually descending. But the moment has almost come! In the second Part, following a further pull of irresistible prayer from the "Voice of the sensuous mortal", Ahana descends at last, and prepares to guide Man anew to Brindavan. The first Part is riotously magnificent as poetry and is very little weighted with philosophy; it is more like Tagore's *Urvashi*, and Ahana is invoked tantalisingly as Woman and Goddess, as Beauty and Love, as rapture and rupture, as Harlot and Virgin, and as the bane and boon of all. The second Part is less Dionysian, more Apollonian, and it is this section that is recast and elaborated and infused with illumined thought as the Song of Dawn,

Ahana, that appeared in 1942 in *Collected Poems and Plays*.

Ahana has a perspective dramatic cast. 'Ahana' is Dawn — "the Dawn of God" — and her advent is the occasion for universal rejoicings. As she appears on the mountains of the East, the Hunters of Joy greet her first, and behind them are the Seekers after Knowledge and the Climbers in quest of Power also. Even at its most puissant, human power is half-rooted in the earth-crust, human knowledge at its most luminous is yet half-blinding because of its exuberance, and only Joy born of Love has the undimmed vision to recognise and not deny the dawning Light. It is appropriate therefore that the Hunters of Joy should lead the pilgrim-throng and hymn their hallelujah of praise and welcome replete with evocations of sound and colour and inwrought with felicities of *dhvani*:

Vision delightful alone on the hills whom the silences
cover.

Closer yet lean to mortality; human, stoop to thy
lover...

Tread through the edges of dawn, over twilight's grey-
lidded margin;

Heal earth's unease with thy feet, O heaven-born
delicate virgin.²⁹

The hour has arrived at last, and the labour of the ages is over; man must no more be divorced from God, nor heaven be separated from the earth; and the Divine should lean closer to man and respond to his love. As an exordium, the first ten lines of *Ahana* are splendidly articulate with their opulence of apt imagery. The heaven-born delicate virgin is wooed as a woman should

²⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 141.

be wooed, and she is also invoked as a goddess should be invoked. Virgin and goddess, Ahana is now quite at home in her new surroundings — and her adoring devotees can pour out their feelings and thoughts to her.

Separated on earth from their divine source, the Hunters of Joy are nevertheless conscious of the fact of their origin; but the separation has made them earth-bound and reduced their life to “a brief incompleteness”. Perhaps the carefree gods are incomplete too after a fashion, even like the incomplete men afflicted with desire and incapacity and hovering death. Ahana should draw close “to the breast of our moral desire”, for the earth too has a part to play in the forging of the final cosmic harmony. No mere desert is our earth, for she has “beatitudes warmer than heaven’s”, and she has her own heritage of sight and sound:

Music is here of the fife and the flute and the lyre
and the timbal,

Wind in the forests, bees in the grove, — spring’s
ardent symbol

Thrilling, the cry of the cuckoo; the nightingale
sings in the branches,

Human laughter is heard and the cattle low in the
ranches.³⁰

Earth is indeed crammed with loveliness, and it cannot all be a vain emptiness, an enormous futility. Earth de-claims in Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Heavens*:

I, Earth, have a deeper power than Heaven;

My lonely sorrow surpasses its rose-joys,

A red and bitter seed of the raptures seven; —

My dumbness fills with echoes of a far Voice.³¹

Earth’s lap has pleasures of her own — and pains no

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 143. ³¹ *ibid.*, p. 284.

less. The cycle of birth and death and birth again strikes us at first as an endless futility. But one day the gods shall meet men half-way, and a new harmony shall be established *here*.

The illusionist on the one hand and the materialist on the other both affirm an Everlasting Nay, though for opposite reasons. "Magic of Maya" says one; the other affirms that all passion and aspiration, all love and delight, all vision and high striving, all poetry and drama, all, all are nought but gases and glands and genes and nerves and brain-cells:

Science, philosophy, head of his mystical chemical
stature,
Music and painting revealing the godhead in sound
and in colour,
Acts of the hero, thoughts of the thinker, search of
the scholar.
All the magnificent planning, all the inquiry and
wonder

Only a trick of the atom....³²

It is childish to suppose that the blind nether forces, through a maddening whirl of blundering chances, have reared this bitter-sweet phenomenal world on the shifting sands of Time. The source-of-all womb-of-all phenomena can be none other than the Spirit:

Surely no senseless Vacancy made it, surely 'twas
 By an almighty One million-ecstasied, thousand-
 fashioned
 passionate.³³

The materialist might argue that, first life and then mind, have evolved out of inconscient matter and given rise to the million forms of earth-life from mere matter to

³² *ibid.*, p. 146. ³³ *ibid.*, p. 147.

thinking man. No blind accident this, but merely the progressive awakening after the initial "trance of the Eternal". Coiled and hid within ourselves is the Spirit, and to awaken it wholly should be the aim of our endeavour. Although the pessimist, the sceptic and the stoic reject the vision of a divine future possibility, and are content to forge a limited destiny for themselves, the dreamers have continued to dream and have pinned their faith in man's evolutionary future. Petal by petal, the hidden powers open out with their lure and fragrance, and although humanity has yet to march through "whirlwind and death-blast and storm-race", the forward movement has been steadily maintained; and what are agonies but austere disciplines, what are fallings but fresh spring-boards, and what are failings but needed felicities! Clear and strident is the Divine Charter whose accents permit no misunderstanding:

Mortals, your end is beatitude, rapture eternal his
meaning:
 Joy, which he most now denies, is his purpose: the
hedges, the screening
 Were but the rules of his play; his denials come to
lure farther.³¹

Suffering too is the grace of Grace, it is the hammer of God raining refining blows on the anvil, beating us to the desired shape. If Rudra is mighty and fierce and ruthless, Shiva whispers in his tenderness his murmurs of understanding and pity. Wherefore are we afraid, then? Of whom are we afraid?

Time was when, in the Garden of Eden, Man and Woman lived happy —

Adam, the goodliest man of men since born

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 154.

His sons; the fairest of her daughters, Eve —³⁵
but it was goodness and happiness in a vacuum, a toy perfection; it couldn't last. Driven out of sheltered Eden, Adam and Eve commenced their chequered career, running uncertainly between the wicker-gates of truth and falsehood, good and evil, and joy and misery. They and their progeny for countless centuries have sought the lost key to the vacant Paradise — but all in vain. Redeemers have come and gone and not one "has availed to deliver"; and indeed there is no going back to the doll-house perfection of ancient Eden. Although once begun in Eden, human life must now steer towards other horizons. Perhaps the Flute-Player of Brindavan gives us the clue to the secret: didn't the Divine and the devotees — God, man and all nature — achieve a perfect harmony, an absolute bliss? Earth-life met the Eternal "with close breast", and glory assumed a million faces in Brindavan's woodlands. There life acquired a "deeper power than heaven", realised a more integral truth, and experienced a more valued joy than elsewhere attainable.

But Brindavan too has passed away, though it fitfully returns to us in our dreams as we hear Krishna's song, and "all our being goes back as a bride of his bliss to the Giver". The heart yearns, the soul is in an anguish of expectation, and in our auspicious dreams, as if a trap-door has opened from above, the miracle is repeated in an occasional drench of bliss. And yet there is no firm return. Life the river of the Spirit dashes against the hills, leaps into the ravines, and struggles hard to escape into the ampler and purer valleys beyond. But —

A stony and monstrous resistance

Meets it piling up stubborn limits. Afflicted the river

³⁵ *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, ll. 323-4.

Treasures a scattered sunbeam, moans for a god to deliver,
Longing to lapse through the plain's green felicity,
 yearning to widen
Joined to the ocean's shoreless eternity far-off and
 hidden.³⁶

This striving for self-exceeding is the central drama of the universe, but played on the Earth for stage and with Man as the protagonist. Nor is all this striving — even admitting all past failures and present difficulties — a saga foredoomed to defeat for ever. The Powers of Light are on our side, they are watching the struggle, awaiting the appointed hour when victory shall crown our efforts, when the mists shall clear, when the gates of Brindavan shall open to receive us:

There amid flowers
We shall take pleasure in arbours delightful, lengthen-
ing the hours,
Time for our servitor waiting our fancy through
moments unhasting,
Under the cloudless blue of those skies of tranquillity
resting,....

Fruit of our joy rear tall sons and radiant daughters.³⁷ The very inhabitants of Heaven, gorgeous in their golden raiment, might then freely fraternise with us, bringing with them "life-giving garlands plucked by the fountains of Paradise". Fate would then diminish into unimportance, Rudra would cast aside his ferocity, and "life in our limbs shall grow deathless" and heaven and earth shall marry and mingle and endure for ever. Are these only dreams, idle dreams? But the dream shall come true and "the truth shall be greater".

³⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 159. ³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 160.

In the course of the long welcome song, the Hunters of Joy — speaking for themselves and for their brother-pilgrims lower on the slopes or on the plains — have covered the entire winding course of human history and compressed into the mould of an apparently formal invocation the trials, struggles, self-exultations and self-lacerations of humanity, the defeatist moans, the stoic endurances, the heart's surge of hope and the brain's soulless speculations, the contradictory negations and the great affirmations, the loss of old Eden and the promise of a new Brindavan. Ahana listens and visibly changes countenance, and is impatient to descend. And so the Hunters of Joy crown the variegated munificence of their song with this superb chaplet of adoration and entreaty:

Form of the formless All-Beautiful, lodestar of Nature's
aspiration,

Music of prelude giving a voice to the ineffable

Silence...

Come! let thy sweetness and force be a breath in the

breast of the future

Making the god-ways alive...

Vision delightful alone on the peaks whom the

silences cover,

Vision of bliss, stoop down to mortality, lean to thy

lover.³⁸

Ahana too is charmed by the "voice of the sensual mortal" — his "heart of eternal longing" has pursued and won her — his age-long tribulations and travail have pierced her armour and awakened her pity. She makes the decisive god-appointed motion and vouchsafes the prayed-for divine-human response:

But I descend at last...

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 162.

[illegible]

Science and philosophy, introspection and interrogation, fact and myth and symbolism, hope and aspiration and ecstasy, all course through *Ahana's* universe of poesy to overwhelming effect. Now and then, and anon and again, the resounding cataract crystallises into dazzling images and striking evocations: "Brooded out drama and epic, structured the climb of the sonnet"; "All is a wager and danger, all is a chase and a battle"; "Time's doors shudder / Swinging wide on their hinges into Eternity"; "Dupe of a figment of consciousness, doped with behaviour and feature". Studded with iridescent lightnings, *Ahana* is one long reverberation of music, a feast alike for the physical and the inner ear.

Ahana is also one of the poems in which Sri Aurobindo has experimented on classical quantitative prosody and tried to naturalise it in English. Thus one of his later poems, *Descent*, is written in sapphics; another, *Ocean Oneness*, in alcaics; and a third, *Thought the Paraclete*, in phaleuciackes; but these can only be called preliminary skirmishes with the problem, and complete success may be claimed only when the hexameter too has been tackled and mastered. And it would appear

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 158.

that in two long poems — *Ahana* and the unfinished epic, *Ilion* — Sri Aurobindo has largely mastered the elusive and leonine hexameter as well. *Ahana*'s verse, however, has the additional embellishment of rhyme, while — as we will see later — *Ilion* is unrhymed like the normal hexameter. Rhyme is used in *Ahana* because it is a poem partly of reflective thought and partly of lyrical feeling, swinging between the poles of statement and prayer, argument and prophecy. *Ilion*, on the other hand, is an epic in its comprehension and majestic movement, and Sri Aurobindo has accordingly eschewed rhyme from its more elemental thunder-inspired verse.

The history of English poetry is strewn with the unsuccessful attempts to acclimatise the sensitive and subtly individual rhythms of the hexameter to the rugged terrain of English verse. In Tennyson's words —

When was a harsher sound ever heard, ye Muses, in
England?

When did a frog coarser croak upon our Helicon?
Hexameters no worse than daring Germany gave us,
Barbarous experiment, barbarous hexameters.

It is doubtful though if Tennyson would have stood by this generalised derogation if he had had a chance of reading *Ahana* or *Ilion*, in which Sri Aurobindo has put into practice his own "sound and realistic theory" of true quantity.

In his long essay 'On Quantitative Metre' printed as Appendix A to *Collected Poems and Plays*, Sri Aurobindo has discussed in considerable detail the entire problem. "If we are to get a true theory of quantity", he says, "the ear must find it; it cannot be determined by mental fictions or by reading with the eye".⁴² He is firmly per-

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 334.

suaded that in any scheme of quantitative verse in English, all three elements — accent, stress and quantity — should be harnessed for the purpose and “united and even fused together”. There are several long-vowel syllables in English, which according to orthodox classical rules, will be taken to be intrinsically long; but their number is insufficient to construct quantitative metres in English. Sri Aurobindo therefore advocates the addition to their number of stressed syllables as well, arguing that stress invariably confers “weight-length” which is as legitimate as intrinsic length. Accordingly, Sri Aurobindo reduces his system to a set of four rules:

1. All stressed syllables are metrically long, and so are long-vowel syllables.
2. All short-vowel syllables, when not stressed, are short except when they have a heavy load of consonants.
3. As regards sounds of doubtful or variable quantity and quantity within individual syllables, the ear must judge and decide about the length.
4. As in accentual metres, in quantitative metres in English too modulation should be freely permitted.

While these rules must apply to all quantitative metres in English, the hexameter is a class by itself and “stands as the central knot of the problem; if that is loosened, the rest follows”.⁴³ If the hexameter is to be naturalised in English, certain pre-conditions are called for. Firstly, a suitable theme is needed — either one of epic magnificence and comprehension or one instinct with largeness of spirit and high-arching thought, expressing itself in luminous flashes, mighty iridescences, ecstatic cries and jewelled epigrams. Secondly, a system of true quantity

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 351.

as outlined above. Thirdly, a wide-ranging modulation has to be accepted as the bye-law of the English hexameter. The classical hexameter is a falling rhythm of six feet, — five dactyls and a culminating spondee; but spondees are permissible substitutes for the first four dactyls — though not the fifth — and occasionally a trochee takes the place of the final spondee. But while Sri Aurobindo categorically declares that the hexameter, being a dactylic metre, “must remain unequivocally and patently dactylic”, he nevertheless advocates, taking into consideration the genius of the English language, a large number and variety of modulations.¹¹ Freedom, yes, but only the freedom that answers an imperative rhythmical or emotional need, the freedom that moves within the prescribed confines of the mould with puissance as well as with restraint, the freedom under whose confident play the base-plank of the hexameter doesn’t crack. In a word, therefore, the hexameter has a chance of naturalisation in English only when a superlative poetic genius comes forward, takes in his firm grip the noble instrument fashioned by Homer and Virgil, adjusts the keys a little and the strings, and plays on the hoary instrument a rich modern note, holding in a charmed easy balance the twin pulls of law and impulse, achieving an yet unaccomplished harmony between theory and practice, tradition and experiment, meaning and melody. And one may perhaps hazard the opinion that in *Ahuna* and *Ilion* the

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 359-60. In a letter written on 24 December 1942, Sri Aurobindo returned to the theme and pointed out that “natural length in English depends, or can depend, on the dwelling of the voice giving metrical value or weight to the syllable... both weight by ictus (stress) and weight by prolongation of the voice”, and he concluded by affirming: “My quantitative system... is based on the natural movement of the English tongue, the same in prose and poetry, and not any artificial theory”.

hexameter has at last found its true and proper stride, its sovereign organ-voiced puissance, its unique evocative power.

This is not the place to make any close critical study of Sri Aurobindo's deft handling of the hexameter in *Ahana* or to discuss and illustrate all the minutiae of his prosodical technique. It is enough to state that he wields this ancient metre with a rare mastery, and line after line offers evidence of his uncanny sense of semantic and sound values. Here is a significant passage:

High on the | cliffs the | Great Ones are | watching,
the | Mighty and | Deathless,
Soaring and | plunging the | roadway of the | Gods
climbs up | lifted and | breathless;
Ever we | hear in the | heart of the | peril a | flute
go be|fore us,
Luminous | beckoning | hands in the | distance in | vite
and imp|lore us.
Ignorant, | circled with | death and the | a byss, we
have | dreamed of a | human
Paradise | made from the | mind of a | man, from
the | heart of a | woman,
Dreamed of the | Isles of the | Blest in a | light of
per|petual | summer,

Dreamed of the | joy of an | earthly | life with nō |
pāin for in cōmer.⁴⁵

The last foot is always a trochee, giving thereby a completeness to the falling rhythm. The first four feet and even the fifth — normally dactyls or spondees — are variously modulated, keeping in mind, however, the torrential dactylic motion of the verse. The first line above is made up of a dactyl, a trochee, a molossus, two consecutive dactyls, and a final trochee. In the second line, the laboured motion of the syllables but brings powerfully to life the breathless climb. Apart from the trisyllabic substitutions like anti-bacchius (- - ♪), the cretic (- ♪ -), and the molossus (- - -), there are a couple of tetrasyllabic substitutions (- - ♪ ♪ ; - ♪ ♪ ♪ ; ionic a majore and first paeon) for the dactyl, in the second and fifth lines respectively. The pauses too are located at different points in the different lines — at the end of the first foot in the fifth line, which suggestively overflows into the next line, while there is hardly any pause in the course of the second line, and the third, fourth, and seventh lines. The chief prosodic sin in English, whether the base is the five-foot iambic line or the dactylic hexameter, is the deadly sin of monotony. A too mechanically contrived dactylic line has a fatal tendency in English to shed its characteristic falling rhythm and assume rather an anapaestic rising rhythm. Sri Aurobindo has saved his hexameter from such a fate. The true movement of the hexameter is “a swift stream or a large flow, an undulating run, the impetuous bounding of a torrent, an ocean surge or a divine gallop of the horses of the sungod”.⁴⁶ And when one reads a passage like the following,

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 159. ⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 357.

although the tongue may make a slip at first, presently the ear will guide the tongue and the hexameter will adequately fulfil itself:

Vīśṇoḥ dēlightful ālone on the hills whōm the
 silēnces cōver,
 Closēr yet | lean tō mōrtality; | hūmān, | stoop tō
 thy | lōver.
 Wonderfūl, | gōld līkē ā | mōon in the | squarē of the |
 sūn whērē thou | strāyest |
 Glīmmers thy | fācē amid | crystal | purities; | mighty
 thou | plāyest |
 Sōlē on the | pēaks of the | wōrld, unāfraīd of thy |
 lonēlinēss. | Glānces |
 Lēap frōm thee | dōwn tō us, | dream-seas and | light-
 falls and | magical | trānces; |
 Sūn-drops | flākē frōm thy | eyes and the | heart's
 cāvērns | packēd arē with | plēasurē |
 Strāngē līkē ā | sōng without | wōrds or the | dāncē
 of ā | mēasurēlēs, | mēasurē.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 141.

III

Six Poems (1934), *Poems* (1941), the sixteen pieces that are printed at the end of *Collected Poems and Plays* and the 'metrical experiments' included in the Appendix to the posthumous collection *More Poems* (1957) are all attempts to adapt divers classical quantitative metres to English verse, and several of the poems are also examples of a primary 'overhead' inspiration achieving fullness of articulation as the *mantra*. Mystical experience, being by its very nature untranslatable in terms of logical categories, has perforce to borrow significance from the use of words and rhythms as symbols of and as intimations from something above and beyond themselves, and at the same time as something springing up from the mystic's innermost psychic depths, deeper than ever plummet sounded. The great mystic poets of the world are thus inveterately "obscure", trafficking in symbols that perplex all except the initiated or chosen few who are able or willing to catch the lucent rays that emanate from the supernal Light.⁴⁸ Such poetry has but rarely been achieved in the past, especially in English; but Sri Aurobindo held the view, as explained in an earlier section, that the future poetry — even or especially in English — will more and more approximate to the *mantra*, and that it will minimise, if not altogether eliminate, the operations of the meddling middlemen — the intellect, the senses, the imagination itself — and will effect in one swift unfailing step the business of communication from the poet to the reader:

⁴⁸ Nolini Kanta Gupta describes symbols as "a translation in mental and sensual (and vocal) terms of experiences that are beyond the mind and the sense and the speech and yet throw a kind of echoing vibrations upon these lesser levels" (*The Approach to Mysticism*, p. 17).

A divine Ananda, a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative, — one might almost say, an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul has felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into its original creative vision — such spiritual joy is that which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it.⁴⁹

With the *mantra* the poet's soul communicates with the *sahridaya's* soul: the mind and the senses are nothing, the message goes through meeting with no resistance on the way. Sri Aurobindo has poetically described the process as follows:

...when the mantra sinks in Yoga's ear,
 Its message enters stirring the blind brain
 And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound:
 The hearer understands a form of words
 And, musing on the index thought it holds,
 He strives to read it with the labouring mind.
 But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:
 Then, falling silent in himself to know
 He meets the deeper listening of his soul:
 The Word repeats itself in rhythmic strains:
 Thought, vision, feeling, sense, the body's self
 Are seized unalterably and he endures
 An ecstasy and an immortal change;
 He feels a Wideness and becomes a Power,
 All knowledge rushes on him like a sea:

⁴⁹ *The Future Poetry*, pp. 13-4.

Transmuted by the white spiritual ray
 He walks in naked heavens of joy and calm,
 Sees the God-face and hears transcendent speech.⁵⁰

The Taittiriya Upanishad speaks of the five sheaths — body, life (*prāṇa*), mind, supermind (*viññāna*) and Ananda — and if mantric poetry is soul communing with soul, it has irresistibly to penetrate, much as the X-rays do, the divers outer sheaths and reach *viññāna* and lose itself in Ananda. Between mind and supermind, Sri Aurobindo has located various “overhead” planes — Mind of Light, Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind — and a reaction of consciousness from any of these “overhead” levels that helps us to experience the *rasa* or essential taste of some fragment of experience or other, to make it the means of global comprehension and delight ineffable, this could be the overhead aesthesis of that level of consciousness. Overhead aesthesis is thus really the functioning of a trinity of powers, *rasa*, *bhoga* and *ānanda*: starting from the essential taste of a thing, a word, a sound, a thought, a fragment of memory or of current experience, it is presently seen like the Sun to send out its rays in all directions: the sensibility is thrilled into total wakefulness, it misses nothing, it takes in everything: the deeper self is awakened to more than ordinary aesthetic delight, and out of this consummation or *bhoga* comes the true delight of existence, the self-forgetful bliss of the innermost of the five sheaths, *ānandamaya*. As Sri Aurobindo explained in the course of a long letter written in 1946:

It is the universal Ananda that is the parent of aesthesis and the universal Ananda takes three major and original forms, beauty, love and delight,

⁵⁰ *Savitri* (1954), p. 426.

the delight of all existence, the delight in things, in all things.... As we climb beyond Mind, higher and wider values replace the values of our limited mind, life and bodily consciousness. Aesthesis shares in this intensification of capacity.... As it enters the Overhead planes the ordinary aesthesis turns into a pure delight and becomes capable of a high, a large or a deep abiding ecstasy.⁵¹

It is also necessary to remember that *all* overhead poetry is not necessarily mystic poetry, and all mystic poetry is not necessarily mantric poetry. At the overhead heights, of course, mystic poetry born of the utter experience of Reality irresistibly breaks out as the *mantra* which is experience, recordation and communication in one.

Nevertheless, many of these poems have puzzled readers, partly because of their overhead inspiration, and partly because they either handle classical quantitative metres or they seem to sway uncertainly between the patterns of traditional English prosody and the exasperating vagaries of modernist free verse. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to draw the hasty conclusion that because poems like *Ocean Oneness*, *Trance of Waiting*, *Flame-Wind* and *Descent* are given at the end of the Appendix on Quantitative Metre in the second volume of Sri Aurobindo's *Collected Poems and Plays* and because he has indicated the metrical scheme of several of his poems, therefore these poems are no more than a prosodist's experiments in quantitative verse. The soul of the poem, which is the sovereignty of the poet's unique experience, is the main thing, the rest is only the covering — or the system of outer sheaths — which is the 'technique'. As Sri Aurobindo explained in a letter:

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 931-2.

The search for technique is simply the search for the best and most appropriate form for expressing what has to be said and once it is found, the inspiration can flow quite naturally and fluently into it.... There are only two conditions about artistry: (1) that the artistry does not become so exterior as to be no longer art and (2) that substance (in which of course I include *bhāva*) is not left behind in the desert or else art and *bhāva* not woven into each other.⁵²

As for 'obscurity', it is apparently there — in several of these poems — but it is unavoidably there. Poetry is always the expression of a mood or a movement of thought or a fragment of experience in an outer objective or an inner subjective or spiritual mould. Like technique, obscurity too can be condemned only when, instead of being integral to the 'substance', it is merely a superimposition upon it. When a poet has subtle or uncommon thoughts or experiences to communicate, he might find a certain amount of obscurity unavoidable. The point has been clarified in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

As writing is designed to be read, it is evidently a merit in it to enable, rather than to impede, the reader's understanding, but it is true also that lucidity is not an absolute but a relative virtue — relative to the reader's sympathy and to the complexity and remoteness from ordinary experience of the thought or vision to be communicated. If we find Scott's verse more lucid than, say, Blake's we are by no means entitled to reproach Blake with failure in lucidity. The question is: is he as lucid

⁵² *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Third Series (1949), pp. 163-4.

as possible under the circumstances?... A new secret may demand a new idiom, and we must have ears to hear it.⁵³

And the overhead poet — from whatever level or intensity of overhead consciousness he may react to the impact of phenomena — *has* a "secret" to impart and he is thus often compelled to invent his own idiom and his own rhythms; and even in the matter of "invention" of the technique, word and rhythm are more given to him from above than hammered out or structured laboriously from below. When the mystic or the overhead poet tries to communicate what is reality or felt experience to him to others to whom such experiences are foreign, strange or opaque, he can only use symbol-words and rhythms that come with a compulsive force, and the vibrations of this poetry — if they have potency enough — penetrate the mental and vital sheaths and reach the *sahj-daya's* soul. A poem like Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven* makes on the reader an impact that is not capable of precise intellectual formulation. And this applies even more to Sri Aurobindo's *Thought the Paraclete, Rose of God* and other poems. These are mantric incantations of lesser or greater intensity that have an effect upon us — that *do* something to us — and yet do we *understand* them in every particular, do we gauge the plenty in every crevice, or measure the significance of every turn of thought and every shade of symbolism? All our elaborate attempts at prosaic explication are apt to prove mere heaps of mental stuff so long as the poet's experiences — the climbs of aspiration, the summits of attainment, the beatitudes of *ānanda* — are largely foreign to the reader himself.

⁵³ July 3, 1943.

The best thing would be, perhaps, to read these poems simply as poems, forgetting for the nonce the Aurobindonian theory of quantitative metres as well as his theory of overhead aesthesis. All that is needed is an attentive ear, an inner receptivity, a mood of concentration, and a surrender to the *mantra* — the Word will then be Power, not a body that blurs the vision nor a sound that obscures the meaning. It is thus alone that one should expose oneself to a poem like *The Bird of Fire* which is almost an emanation of primordial music:

Gold-white wings a-throb in the vastness, the bird
 of flame went glimmering over a sunfire curve to
 the haze of the west,
 Skimming, a messenger sail, the sapphire-summer
 waste of a soundless wayless burning sea.
 Now in the eve of the waning world the colour and
 splendour returning drift through a blue-flicker
 air back to my breast,
 Flame and shimmer staining the rapture-white
 foam-west of the waters of Eternity.⁵⁴

The 'Bird of Fire' is the Agni-bird, "the living vehicle of the gold fire of the Divine Light and the white fire of the Divine Tapas and the crimson fire of Divine Love — and everything else of the Divine Consciousness".⁵⁵ As for the form of the verse, it is claimed to be a compromise between the stress system and the foot measure, and lines of twelve and ten stresses alternate, and four such lines make a stanza, and there are four stanzas in all. In poem after poem, the surge of aspiration rises to the Timeless — to coax it to consort with what is im-

⁵⁴ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 279.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 288. Ravindra Khanna's appreciation of the poem appears in *Mother India*, Vol. IX, No. 9, pp. 4ff.

plicated in Time or in "travailing earth". It is a double movement, the aspiration from below and the response from above, and either movement implies the other too. *Thought the Paraclete* has been described as "a vision or revelation of an ascent through spiritual planes", but the ascent of consciousness is suggested by the imagery and the music rather than closely argued out in terms of logical reason:

As some bright archangel in vision flies
 Plunged in dream-caught spirit immensities,
 Past the long green crests of the seas of life,
 Past the orange skies of the mystic mind
 Flew my thought self-lost in the vasts of God.
 Sleepless wide great glimmering wings of wind
 Bore the gold-red seeking of feet that trod
 Space and Time's mute vanishing ends. The face
 Lustred, pale-blue-lined of the hippogriff,
 Eremitic, sole, daring the bourneless ways,
 Over world-bare summits of timeless being
 Gleamed; the deep twilights of the world-abyss
 Failed below. Sun-realms of supernal seeing,
 Crimson-white mooned oceans of pauseless bliss
 Drew its vague heart-yearning with voices sweet.
 Hungering, large-souled to surprise the unconned
 Secrets white-fire-veiled of the last Beyond,
 Crossing power-swept silences rapture-stunned,
 Climbing high far ethers eternal-sunned,
 Thought the great-winged wanderer-paraclete
 Disappeared slow-singing a flame-word rune.
 Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 300. For a full discussion see my 'A Note on *Thought the Paraclete*' in *The Advent*, Vol. I, No. 1 (February 1944). This was printed as an appendix in the two earlier

We are expected to proceed from light to light, from revelation to revelation, till we arrive at and are lost in the rich illimitable calm of the last line. The transition from a purely vital consciousness to a mental one is as noticeable as the change from "green" to "orange" in the third and fourth lines above; but Thought rises higher still, seeking other colours in the spectrum of its steep ascent. The next ten lines constitute the second great movement, from Mind to Higher Mind, then Illumined Mind, then Intuition, then Overmind — "glimmering wings" "gold-red seeking" "pale-blue-lined" "crimson-white" — beyond conceptual thought, beyond intermittent visions, beyond lightning flashes, beyond "sun-realms of supernal seeing". The third movement snaps the leap to the supermind, but this final canter to the goal is truly beyond the resources of language or logic. Thought the Paraclete — our mediator or intercessor between the inconscient and the superconscient — having won the "white-fire-veiled" secrets of the last Beyond disappears into it "slow-singing the flame-word rune". This is paralleled by the last lines of *The Bird of Fire*:

One strange leap of thy mystic stress breaking the barriers of mind and life, arrives at its luminous term
thy flight:

Invading the secret clasp of the Silence and crimson
Fire thou frontest eyes in a timeless Face.⁵⁷

The last line of *Thought the Paraclete* — "Self was left, lone, limitless, nude, immune" — is the concluding movement and spray of revelation; with the realisation of the

editions of the present book (1945, 1950), but is not included in the present edition.

⁵⁷ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 280.

infinite self, the ego is dead, and only the "illimitable Permanent" remains.

In *Thought the Paraclete*, Sri Aurobindo has attempted an interesting variation of the hendecasyllabics of Catullus; but instead of a spondee followed by a dactyl and a succession of three trochees, Sri Aurobindo begins with a trochee, the spondee and the dactyl follow, and are followed by two trochees, and the last syllable of the closing trochee is generally dropped altogether:

— ∪ | — — | — ∪ ∪ | — ∪ | — |

Perhaps the rhythm itself is meant to suggest the idea of evolution-involution or ascent-descent inherent in the poem. And the rhyme-scheme too — aa; bcdcdbe; fgfg; hiiijh; kk — is suggestive of a rising movement intersecting again and again a falling movement, as if the two movements are involved in a prolonged and purposeful embrace. But these analytical evaluations do not really touch the heart of the matter. As Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple, "There is no thought-structure in the poem; there is only a succession of vision and experience — it is a mystic poem, its unity is spiritual and concrete, not a mental and logical building".⁵⁸ What this *mantric* poem does to us is to revive the vision for us and reproduce the experience.

If in *Thought the Paraclete*, the theme is the experience of the flight from Here to Eternity, in pieces like

⁵⁸ *Life—Literature—Yoga*, p. 149. Regarding my own analysis Sri Aurobindo wrote in the course of the same letter: "Iyengar's geological account...is probably as good as any other is likely to be.... A mystic poem may explain itself or a general idea may emerge from it, but it is the vision that is important or what one can get from it by intuitive feeling."

Musa Spiritus, *Bride of the Fire* and *Rose of God* — as also in *The Bird of Fire* — there is the reiterated aspiration that the Eternal should manifest itself in Time. Such poems are more like mystic incantations (to quote M. Abbe Bremond, though written in a different context) “each by the mediation of its proper magic, words, notes, colours, lines — they all aspire to joint prayer”.⁵⁹ And “prayer” or *mantric* chant is much more than a poem:

And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
By the praying mind, or the sound of the voice
praying.⁶⁰

The sense of *Musa Spiritus* and *Bride of the Fire* comes out easily enough even on a first reading, though successive readings may enable one to see much more in the poems:

O word concealed in the upper fire,
Thou who hast lingered through centuries,
Descend from thy rapt white desire,
Plunging through gold eternities.
Into the gulfs of our nature leap,
Voice of the spaces, call of the Light!
Break the seals of Matter's sleep.
Break the trance of the unseen height....⁶¹

And so on, in the seven stanzas following. *Bride of the Fire* has an even simpler cast, it is a poignant cry calling on the Eternal to respond to the earth:

Bride of the Fire, clasp me now close, —
Bride of the Fire!

⁵⁹ Quoted in H. W. Garrod, *The Profession of Poetry*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, p. 36. ⁶¹ *Poems Past and Present*, p. 1.

I have shed the bloom of the earthly rose,

I have slain desire....⁶²

But it is in *Rose of God* that mysticism rises, in Sethna's words, "to a climax of the incantatory art".⁶³ It is a pure mystic cry of the soul, and the triune capacity of the inspired word to *utter* Being, to *name* and *thank* the Holy — in the Heideggerian sense of the words — breaks out as *mantra*, and rhythm, form and phrase and meaning coalesce perfectly into an utter and absolute harmony:

Rose of God, vermillion stain on the sapphires of
heaven,

Rose of Bliss, fire-sweet, seven-tinged with the
ecstasies seven!

Leap up in our heart of humanhood, O miracle, O
flame,

Passion-flower of the Nameless, bud of the mystical
Name.

Rose of God, great wisdom-bloom on the summits
of being,

Rose of Light, immaculate core of the ultimate
seeing!

Live in the mind of our earthhood; O golden
Mystery, flower,

Sun on the head of the Timeless, guest of the
marvellous Hour.

Rose of God, damask force of Infinity, red icon of
night,

Rose of Power with thy diamond halo piercing the
night!

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 3. ⁶³ *Sri Aurobindo -The Poet*, p. 264.

stanzas, there is a suggestion of the great theme making a marvellous full circle: from the Rose of Bliss that is the ultimate expression of the seven-fold Knowledge to the Rose of Love that is permitted to bloom out of the ooze of the seven-fold Ignorance of terrestrial life. Not *there* in Heaven alone, it is *here* on earth too — particularly here — that the Life Divine should be enacted. In Book XI of *Savitri*, the heroine asks “for earth and men” His peace, His oneness, His energy, His joy; and in an earlier Book (‘The Book of Yoga’), Savitri is herself described as “the image of the Whole” — as one might say, the entire Rose of God descended into clay but only to transform it:

What seemed herself was an image of the whole.
 She was a subconscient life of tree and flower,
 The outbreak of the honied buds of spring;
 She burned in the passion and splendour of the rose,
 She was the red heart of the passion flower,
 The dream-white of the lotus in its pool...
 Eternity looked out from her on Time.⁶⁵

What is exceptional in *Savitri* is expected to become the Law in the fullness of evolving Time.⁶⁶

The real problem in Sri Aurobindo's Yoga is not so much to invade the Invisible and be lost in it or even to invoke the Eternal to walk in the corridors of Time; the problem is rather the far more crucial one of earth's transformation in Heaven's image. The Divine might become an *avatār* amidst us and raise us to His level for a brief term; but in the long run He too has found earth-nature not easily amenable to transformation. It is not

⁶⁵ *Savitri*, p. 632.

⁶⁶ For an illuminating commentary on the mysticism and poetry of *Rose of God*, see K. D. Sethna's *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, pp. 264-88.

simply the transformation of the psyche or of the mind — that is, perhaps, not so very difficult to achieve — but of the vital, of the physical, of the subconscious, of the inconscient. It is in *A God's Labour* that Sri Aurobindo has described in its entirety his integral Yoga of man's and earth's transformation:

A voice cried, "Go where none have gone!

Dig deeper, deeper yet

Till thou reach the grim foundation stone

And knock at the keyless gate".

I saw that a falsehood was planted deep

At the very root of things

Where the grey Sphinx guards God's riddle sleep

On the Dragon's outspread wings.⁶⁷

The poet of Yoga describes things vivid to him, ever present or significant to him, and these might comprise happenings in our world or in the occult worlds above and below, insights and inscapes and intensities undreamt of by the average human mentality; and unless the reader brings to the task of poetic appreciation a similar ardour for the Invisible and a total imaginative attention facilitating the opening of an inner door of understanding, the needed link is unlikely to be established and the poetic communication is unlikely to be effected. Sri Aurobindo composed most of these poems in a condition of complete cerebral calm, in a trance of waiting as it were. "I receive from above my head", he wrote to a disciple, "and receive changes and corrections from above without any initiation by myself or labour of the brain. Even if I change a hundred times, the mind does not work at that, it only receives."⁶⁸ It is as though

⁶⁷ *Poems Past and Present*, p. 8. ⁶⁸ *Savitri*, p. 882.

these poems have written themselves out in terms of an ordained inevitability. But if one could read such poems and listen to them in an attitude of inner calm and austere silence, it would not be difficult to re-enact the Yogi's ardours and experiences, and share the visions splendid and beatitudes ineffable:

My mind is awake in a stirless trance,

Hushed my heart, a burden of delight;

Dispelled is the senses' flicker-dance,

Mute the body aureate with light...⁶⁹

Earth is now girdled with trance and Heaven is put

round her for vesture.

Wings that are brilliant with fate sleep at Eternity's

gate.

Time waits, vacant, the Lightning that kindles, the

Word that transfigures:

Space is a stillness of God building his earthly

abode...⁷⁰

Slow the heart-beats rhythm like a giant hammer's;

Missioned voices drive to me from God's doorway

Words that live not save upon Nature's summits,

Ecstasy's chariots...⁷¹

At rest in the unchanging Light, mute with the

wordless self-vision,

Spirit, pass out of thyself; Soul, escape from the

clutch of Nature.

All thou hast seen cast from thee, O Witness...⁷²

I saw the spirit of the cosmic Ignorance;

I felt its power besiege my gloried fields of trance...⁷³

⁶⁹ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 280. ⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 363.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 368. ⁷² *ibid.*, p. 372. ⁷³ *More Poems*, p. 35.

Hill after hill was climbed and now,
Behold, the last tremendous brow
And the great rock that none has trod:
A step, and all is sky and God...⁷⁴

I have delved through the dumb Earth's dreadful
heart

And heard her black mass' bell.
I have seen the source whence her agonies part
And the inner reason of hell.⁷⁵

There are, again, single lines like "a quiver and colour of crimson flame"... "in that diamond heart the fires undrape"⁷⁶... "the Eternal is broken into fleeting lives"⁷⁷... "Time is my drama or my pageant dream"⁷⁸... "a dance of fire-flies in the fretted gloom"⁷⁹... "and the gold god and the dream boat come not"⁸⁰... "and a huddle of melancholy hills in the distance"⁸¹... "and high omnipotence come near our grasp"⁸²... "a dire intrusion wrapped in married cloud and flame"⁸³... "to the hill-tops of silence from over the infinite sea"⁸⁴ — these lines are mini-miracles, miracles like the fresh sticky spring foliage or the incredible sweetness of the honey in the comb. In a world paralysed by fear and hatred, the only counter-vailing power is the still small but potent voice of the Yogin-singer, whose mantric words are verily a dance of creative life and a nectarean promise for the morrow.

⁷⁴ *Poems Past and Present*, p. 17. ⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ *Collected Poems and Plays*, Vol. II, p. 281. ⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 284.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 297. ⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 299. ⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 366.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 371. ⁸² *More Poems*, p. 29.

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 35. ⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 88.

IV

When *Collected Poems and Plays* appeared in 1942 on Sri Aurobindo's seventieth birthday, readers were overwhelmed at once by the rich and varied content of the two sumptuous volumes. But easily the most unexpected item was *Ilion*—an epic fragment running to 381 lines—at the end of the second volume, given as if in illustration of Sri Aurobindo's views on the adaptability of quantitative hexameters in English verse. The footnote described it as the opening passages of "a poem left unfinished". Fifteen years later, the whole work was published as *Ilion: An Epic in Quantitative Hexameters*, comprising eight Books and an incomplete ninth Book. Except for the portion published in 1942, the rest of the poem hadn't evidently received final revision at Sri Aurobindo's hands. The conclusion too remains unconcluded, but K. D. Sethna—who has carefully examined the manuscript and seen the poem through the press—thinks that perhaps Sri Aurobindo did complete the poem, though the "last pages have somehow got lost".⁸⁵

Both Purani and Nirod record a conversation with Sri Aurobindo on 3 January 1939 when the discussion was on the hexameter. Sri Aurobindo mentioned that it was one of his Cambridge contemporaries, H. N. Ferrar, who had first given the clue to the hexameter by reading out a line from Arthur Hugh Clough—perhaps the line: "He like a god came leaving his ample Olympian chamber"—and this had led to the composition of *Ilion* at Pondicherry. Nirod records that Sri Aurobindo also recited four lines from the poem:

⁸⁵ *Sri Aurobindo—The Poet*, p. 357.

spun heroic romances round the figures of Achilles and Penthesilea, and in Henrich von Kleist's tragedy (1808) — a classic of German poetic drama — Penthesilea first kills Achilles on the field of battle in an outburst of lust and hate, then kills herself in revulsion and remorse; and the outer struggle between Hero and Amazon is paralleled by the intestine inner struggle between the conscious and the unconscious selves of the heroine. In Sri Aurobindo's poem, Penthesilea is an Indian Queen who has been lured to Troy to fight Achilles on the opposite side — and she hates as well as loves the Phthian hero. Here, however, the outer struggle is obscurely — but none the less definitively — controlled by the cosmic purposings of the gods on Olympus. In the *Iliad* the "wrath" of Achilles with Agamemnon starts the action (or occasions the impasse that is the prelude to the action); in *Ilion*, the action comprises the "offer" of Achilles to Troy conveyed at dawn, its rejection in the morning by Troy's assembled chieftains, the call to arms, the partings, the synod of the gods, and the fateful death-grapple and the culminating catastrophe. Dawn rises over Ilion's "mystieried greatness" —

High over all that a nation had built and its love and
its laughter,

Lighting the last time highway and homestead,
market and temple.

Looking on men who must die and women destined
to sorrow.

Looking on beauty fire must lay low and the sickle
of slaughter....⁸⁹

The words “the last time” come with an unexpected but

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* (1957), p. 2.

fatal emphasis, and from time to time the words of doom are repeated in divers contexts — in Troy, in the Greek camp, on Olympus — *this last time, the last of our fights, for the last time, my last dire wrestle*; and “like the insistent tom-tom in an impressionistic play like Eugene O’Neill’s *Emperor Jones*”, to quote Prema Nandakumar, “these periodic hammerings of emphasis... organise the cumulative effect of approaching inevitable doom”.⁹⁰ Sinister and ominous, Doom is the shapeless ruthless unseen — it nears, it glowers, it prepares for a swoop — and Doom is the dark and terrible monster of surprise and finality:

Doom in her sombre and giant uprising
 Neared, assailing the skies: the sense of her lived in
all pastimes;
 Time was pursued by unease and a terror woke in
the midnight...
 Under her, dead to the watching immortals, Deiphobus
hastened
 Clanging in arms through the streets of the beautiful
insolent city,
 Brilliant, a gleaming husk but empty and left by the
daemon.
 Even as a star long extinguished whose light still
travels the spaces,
 Seen in its form by men, but itself goes phantom-like
fleeting
 Void and null and dark through the uncaring infinite
vastness,

⁹⁰ *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, Number XX (1926), p. 59, in the article ‘Approaches to *Ilion*’. This excellent 30-page study and K. D. Sethna’s ‘Sri Aurobindo and the Hexameter’ (included in *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, 1947) are indispensable to an understanding of *Ilion*.

So now he seemed to the sight that sees all things in
the Real.⁹¹

Troy is doomed, Deiphobus is doomed, and he is already dead in the eyes of the gods though not as yet in the eyes of men. A man is dead, but till the news appear people think he is alive. A star is extinguished, but people see it shining still since the light takes long to travel the infinite spaces and reach their eyes, like a letter being received days after the death of the writer. "It is a question", says Sethna, "whether in the entire range of similes there has been one so grandly apt and penetrating, so cosmic in its beauty and its glimpse of the supra-terrestrial".⁹² The whole poem reverberates with this sense of doom, for although the principal characters talk most eloquently, make striking gestures and engage in desperate actions, it is as though they are thistledowns carried hither and thither, now lifted up now cast on the ground, by a prepotent force that has decreed the doom of Troy on this last day of her proud history.

When after the death of Hector Achilles retires once more to sulk in his tents, Penthesilea presently proves a terror to the Greeks. She is the fierce new hope of the Trojans —

Noble and tall and erect in a nimbus of youth and
of glory,
Claiming the world and life as a fief of her strength
and her courage.⁹³

The Penthesilea-Achilles motif had been obscurely essayed by Sri Aurobindo earlier in the narrative poems *Uloupy*

⁹¹ *Iliad*, p. 6.

⁹² *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 74.

⁹³ *Iliad*, p. 10.

and *Chitrangada*, both incomplete, referred to in an earlier chapter (IV. vi). The warrior-woman, and the heroic hero — the forged antagonism, the fateful attraction! In *Iliou*, Penthesilea pursues Achilles in love and in hate, but Achilles is in love with Polyxena, daughter of Priam, and for her sake would gladly spare Troy. There are hawks and doves both in Troy and in the Greek camp, and even Olympus is divided on the issue. Like the debate in Hell described in the second Book of *Paradise Lost*, the speeches in the Trojan Assembly as also those of the Greek chieftains present forcefully divergent attitudes that have a universal currency. In Troy, the elder statesman Antenor and his son Hecubus advise the acceptance of Achilles' offer, but the hawks — Laocoon, Penthesilea, Paris — carry the day. Rebuffed by Troy, Achilles sends an insolent message to Agamemnon, and the Greek chieftains debate whether they should join Achilles in his attack on Troy or sullenly stand aside from the conflict. Menelaus feels demoralised and strikes a wholly defeatist note, some of the chieftains rail against Agamemnon and some rage against Achilles. It is left to Odysseus to show the way of prudence and calculation. Agamemnon, fallible mortal though he may be, remains the chosen leader of Greece, not "a perfect arbiter armed with impossible virtues", but "a man among men who is valiant, wise and far-seeing". Achilles' prowess is another asset that shouldn't be cast aside in a mood of petulance but exploited for the success of the common cause. Like Paris in Troy, Odysseus wins here, and the climactic death-grapple becomes inevitable.

For almost ten years the war has been going on, this see-saw between victory and defeat, and hope and despair:

All went backwards and forwards tossed in the
swing of the death-game.
Vain was the toil of the heroes, the blood of the
mighty was squandered,
Spray as of surf on the cliffs when it moans
unappeased, unrequited..."

And now, on the eve of the final battle, the gods too assemble in full force to confabulate and decree:

Hera came in her pride, the spouse of Zeus and his sister.

As at her birth from the foam of the spaces white
Aphrodite
Rose in the cloud of her golden hair like the moon in
its halo.¹⁵

And others too, "aegis-bearing Athene, shielded and helmeted", "Artemis, archeress ancient", "immortal Apollo", Themis, and Ananke, and Hephaestus, and the "ancient Dis", "into the courts divine they crowded, radiant, burning". In Sri Aurobindo's play, *Eric*, as we saw earlier (Chapter VI), the end-note is "not Thor... but Freya"; in *Perseus the Deliverer*, the change is from ruthless Poseidon's to enlightened Pallas Athene's rule. There is on the terrestrial as well as the cosmic scale a continual push of evolution — from war and revenge to peace and compassion, from the reign of violence and hate to the rule of reason and enlightenment — and behind the monumental clash of arms and the destruction of the towered city and the doom of empire, obscure forces are at work to usher in a new era, to compel new life to rise phoenix-like out of the ashes of the old. On a superficial view, some of the divinities — Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo — are on the side of the Trojans, while others,

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 5. ⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 106.

Poseidon and Hera and Athene, are with the Greeks. And above them all are the "awful three" — Themis, Dis and Ananke — and Zeus of course is above everybody. These gods and goddesses have their divers powers and personalities, yet they are not the ultimate Power — as Agni, Vayu and Indra are made to realise in the Kena Upanishad. In the Council of the Gods when Zeus tells Athene that she shall rule as the light of reason the Greek and the Saxon, the Frank and the Roman, the goddess answers that she knows that she too (like the rest) is but a subordinate power ordained to function only for a limited term:

Zeus, I see and I am not deceived by thy words in
my spirit.
 We but build forms for thy thought while thou smilest
down high o'er our toiling;
 Even as men are we tools for thee, who are thy chil-
dren and dear ones...
 This too I know that I pass preparing the paths of
Apollo
 And at the end as his sister and slave and bride I must
sojourn
 Rapt to his courts of mystic light and unbearable
brilliance.⁹⁶

Earlier during the debate, "the beautiful mystic Apollo" had accepted his temporary fading out and also prophesied his future resurgence:

Zeus, I know that I fade; already the night is
around me...
 I will go forth from your seats and descend to the
night among mortals
 There to guard the flame and the mystery....

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 119.

Jealous for truth to the end my might shall prevail
and for ever
Shatter the moulds that men make to imprison their
limitless spirits.
Dire, overpowering the brain I shall speak out my
oracles splendid.
Then in their ages of barren light or lucidity fruitful
Whenso the clear gods think they have conquered
earth and its mortals,
Hidden God from all eyes, they shall wake from
their dream and recoiling
Still they shall find in their paths the fallen and
darkened Apollo.⁹⁷

Mystic Apollo will withdraw awhile and leave the stage to Pallas Athene and the reign of reason — but reason too will one day be compelled to recognise its insufficiency, and then will come the time for Apollo's return signifying the age of sovereign intuition. Apollo will be all the purer and stronger for a temporary eclipse, for this will be the means of tempering on the anvil of intellectual reason his old oracular insights and thereby evolving the higher intuitive or (shall we say) supramental intelligence. From magic and mystery to reason and science and so on to the supramental light and force! The language is recognisably Homeric, but the Aurobindonian touch of creative thought gives the whole debate the look of a dialectic and even of a prophecy.⁹⁸

It is Sri Aurobindo's deeper artistic intention to insinuate through hints and nuances of surmise that human motives and actions are not autonomous but are involved in the movements and purposings of the gods. Poseidon

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 116.

⁹⁸ See also Sethna, *Sri Anubindo—The Poet*, pp. 319ff.

The last we hear is the Hellene shout and the name of Achilles, but the end of the affair is left to be inferred by the reader.

It is probable enough that Sri Aurobindo intended to conclude the poem following the main lines of tradition. Achilles kills Penthesilea after a fierce engagement, Paris kills Achilles by aiming an arrow at his vulnerable heel with Apollo's connivance, and the Greeks practise deceit and enter Troy the same night and set fire to it. All this is prefigured in Cassandra's prophecies and Briseis' visions and Aeneas' dream. Thus his prophetic sister to Paris:

Yes, he (Achilles) shall fall and his slayer too shall
perish and Troy with his slayer....

Thou shalt return for thy hour while Troy yet stands
in the sunshine.

She then returns to her chamber and cries in her pain:
Troy shall fall in her sin and her virtues shall not
protect her....

Woe is me, woe for the flame that approaches the
house of my fathers!¹⁰⁰

Aeneas dreams that Ilion's streets are on fire and foemen are around him, and Briseis sees thrice a bow releasing an arrow that strikes Achilles' heel.¹⁰¹ And Cassandra sees "centuries slain by a single day of the anger of heaven".

Like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, *Ilion* too — whether left incomplete, or is now found incomplete — is a monumental relation of events, of intimate human interest underlining the play of human egoism, pride and hatred and the mysterious workings of destiny. As other epics

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, pp. 101-2.

Charioted far in his dreams amid visions of glory
and terror,
Scenes of a vivider world, — though blurred and
deformed in the brain-cells,
Vague and inconsequent, there full of colour and
beauty and greatness, —
Suddenly drawn by the pull of the conscious thread
of the earth-bond
And of the needs of Time and the travail assigned in
the transience
Warned by his body, Deiphobus, reached in that
splendid remoteness,
Touched through the nerve-ways of life that branch
to the brain of the dreamer,
Heard the terrestrial call and slumber startled receded
Sliding like dew from the mane of a lion.¹⁰⁵

The invasion of Deiphobus' world of privacy by the intrusive summons of the outside world is compared to the invasion of the bitter-sweet infinitudes of the subconscious dream-world by the aggressive pull of everyday actuality. The dreams melt away, slumber slips away—and isn't "life" itself "such stuff as dreams are made on", to be shattered any time by the assertive will of the immortals who pull the strings of the human drama from the occult world behind?

Sometimes double similes occur to produce particular effects. For example, Antenor's speech in the Trojan Assembly is likened to the billows that are like "the hooded wrath of the serpent".¹⁰⁶ Odysseus in the Greek camp is likened to an oak, a peak, a conqueror, a mortal Atlas, and finally to

106 *Ilion*, p. 3.

106 *ibid.*, p. 33.

Lo, in the night came this dream; on the morn thou
arisest for battle...
And in the noon there was night. And Apollo passed
out of Troya...
Loud with the clamour of hooves and the far-rolling
gust of the war-cry....¹⁰⁸

Most of *Iliou* didn't receive finishing touches at the poet's hands, and accordingly the tongue trips off and on, and the dactylic changes unawares into the rising anapaestic rhythm. But a little practice helps, and in any case there can be no question about the total effect which is overpowering. It is, however, only when reading a passage of some length — like the magnificent Exordium — that the full force of the rhythmic plenitude can slowly sink into the awakened consciousness:

Dawn in her journey eternal compelling the labour
of mortals,
Dawn the beginner of things with the night for their
rest or their ending,
Pallid and bright-lipped arrived from the mists and
the chill of the Euxine.
Earth in the dawn-fire delivered from starry and
shadowy vastness
Woke to the wonder of life and its passion and
sorrow and beauty,
All on her bosom sustaining, the patient compassionate
Mother.¹⁰⁹

As if by sleight of artistic intention, *Ilion* has been shaped by Sri Aurobindo as the saga of the Indian Queen, Penthesilea. It is she who fills the ample spaces of the epic with her aggressive and radiant power and presence. In the opening Book she is seen coming out

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 2, 14, 16, 43, 74, 95, 102, 125. ¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 1.

of her chamber of sleep "capturing the eye like a smile or a sunbeam". To Laocoon in the Trojan Assembly, she is heaven-sent and a continent in herself. We see her in Priam's Palace surrounded by her chieftains — Surabdas, Surenas, Pharatus, Somaranes, Valarus, Tauron, Sumalus, Arithon, Sambas and Artavoruxes. Her challenge to Achilles is delivered by the herald in Book V:

Sea of renown and valour that fillest the world with thy
rumour...

Dread of the world and my target, swift-footed glorious
hero!...

O, I have longed for thee, warrior! Therefore today by
thy message

So was I seized with delight that my heart was hurt with
its rapture...

Nay, if thou hast that strength, then hunt me, O hunter,
and seize me...

But if thou canst not, death of myself or thyself thou
shalt capture.¹¹⁰

In the Greek camp, Menelaus despairingly asks: "Who in the dreadful field can prevail against Penthesilea?", while the Locrian swift-footed Ajax calls her "this hell-bitch armed by the furies". Zeus himself takes in his eternal gaze "the beauty of Penthesilea". And Book IX is mostly filled with the ambience of her prowess and personality. The bold "unwomanly" woman, woman as uncompromising Shakti, had been sketched earlier by Sri Aurobindo in Vidula (after the *Mahabharata*), in Chitrangada, in Cleopatra of *Rodogune*, in Aslaug of *Eric*, in Cassiopea of *Perseus the Deliverer*; and Andromeda was the portrait of a woman fearless as well as compassionate, her Shakti playing the role of triumphant Grace

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

rather than that of ruthless power. But Penthesilea still stands apart in her fiery epic grandeur. She comes partly as the would-be saviour of Troy and partly — or chiefly — as the seeker of Achilles, half in hate and half in love. Staking all, daring all, she is the committed uncalculating woman made up of beauty and love and valour and hate. Nevertheless, she is neither the whole nor the really wholesome efflorescence of Woman as Shakti. In the Western tradition, Penthesilea could be linked with Atalanta and Artemis and even Ishtar of the still earlier myths. But Sri Aurobindo sees her in other possible lights as well. In European literature, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* led up to *The Divine Comedy* and its sanctified heroine, Beatrice. "Sri Aurobindo's Penthesilea too", writes Prema Nandakumar, "is but the forerunner of the more than Beatrice-like power of Savitri, the immaculate Woman who redeems Satyavan, the besieged Troy of the triune *Satyam-Sivam-Sundaram*. Beyond the 'tragic art' of *Ilion* looms in white radiance the 'divine comedy' of the spiritual action in *Savitri*".¹¹

V

All streams in Sri Aurobindo's Himalayas of achievement seem to lead to the *puṣkariṇī* — the nectarean pool — of *Savitri*. The narrative poems, *Urvashi* and *Love and Death*, with their preoccupation with the problem of death and of human felicity, find their remote consummation in the legendary and symbolistic tale of Satyavan, Savitri and Yama; the dramatic heroines, Andromeda, Rodogune, Aslaug, the warrior-queens, Chit-

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo Circle, XX Number, p. 80.

rangada and Penthesilea, are all included and exceeded in Savitri; the philosophy of *The Life Divine* and the "ten limbs" of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga find superb enactment in *Savitri*; the whole history of earth and man and society and human polity, the past failures, the present confusions, the future possibilities, are also dramatised on the multi-tier stage of *Savitri*; the evolution and architecture of the occult worlds — the worlds of light above, the regions of darkness below, the twilight realm between — are presented in *Savitri* as compellingly living realities; and, finally, whatever was of universal relevance in Sri Aurobindo's personal, political or spiritual life finds memorable recordation in *Savitri*.

During 1938-40 and later, Sri Aurobindo wrote a number of sonnets (sixty or more), most of them snaps of spiritual autobiography, and what is essential in these has also gone to enrich the total content of *Savitri*. But these sonnets have their distinctive character too, and some of them at least are among the best of their kind, comparable indeed to the finest work of Donne or Hopkins. It would thus be rewarding to read Sri Aurobindo's sonnets as the rhythmic diary-notes of an integral Yogin's experiences ranging from the Inconscient to the Superconscient realms. 'The Conscious Inconscient', 'The Dumb Inconscient', 'The Inconscient Foundation' and 'The Inconscient' are so many probings and proddings into the density of the inconscient so as to provoke it to reveal its true nature. Although the "dumb Inconscient" is "a night of all things, packed and infinite", — although the "inconscient blind Infinity" might throw up

Masters of falsehood, Kings of Ignorance,

High sovereign Lords of suffering and death...

Cold propagandists of a million lies,

Dictators of a world of agony...¹¹² —
 nevertheless it is out of the Inconscient itself that the
 glories of our earth and state ultimately emerge. And
 Homo Sapiens —

Man is a narrow bridge, a call that grows,
 His soul the dim bud of God's flaming rose.¹¹³

The 'Conscious Inconscient' is "a mathematician Mind
 that never errs... an adept of a thousand mysteries".¹¹⁴
 When the mind in indrawn concentration peers micro-
 scope-like into the "inconscient foundation" of our life,
 what does it see except "the black Inconscient's enigma-
 tic script... the tables of the Ignorance... the scriptures
 of Necessity and Chance"?¹¹⁵ All these insights and il-
 luminations are gathered and coalesced into the mature
 revelation of 'Inconscient' dated 21 March 1944:

Out of a seeming void and dark-winged sleep
 Of dim inconscient infinity
 A Power arose from the insentient deep,
 A flame-whirl of magician Energy.

Some huge somnambulist Intelligence
 Devising without thought process and plan
 Arrayed the burning stars' magnificence,
 The living bodies of beasts and the brain of man.

What stark Necessity or ordered Chance
 Became alive to know the cosmic whole?
 What magic of numbers, what mechanic dance
 Developed consciousness, assumed a soul?

¹¹² *More Poems*, p. 61. This sonnet 'The Iron Dictators' is dated
 14 November 1938.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, p. 65. ¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 64.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 71.

The darkness was the Omnipotent's abode,
Hood of omniscience, a blind mask of God.¹¹⁶

The exciting journey of consciousness — the great leap from Inconscience to Superconscience, from Ignorance to Omniscience — is the whole mechanics of the evolutionary endeavour. In his first sonnet on 'Evolution', Sri Aurobindo addressed unfinished or transitional Man:

All is not finished in the Unseen's decree....
O Thou who climbedst to man from the dull stone,
Turn to the mirrored summits yet unwon...¹¹⁷

But the later sonnet on the same subject written the day following the composition of 'Inconscient' is more of a mantric evocation of an epiphanic experience:

I passed into a lucent still abode
And saw as in a mirror crystalline
An ancient Force ascending serpentine
Of the ascending spirals of the aeonic road.
Earth was a cradle for the arriving God
And man but a half-dark half-luminous sign
Of the transition of the veiled Divine
From Matter's sleep and the tormented load
Of ignorant life and death to the Spirit's light.
Mind liberated swam Light's ocean-vast,
And life escaped from its grey tortured line
I saw Matter illumining its parent Night.
The soul could feel into infinity cast,
Timeless God-bliss the heart incarnadine.¹¹⁸

What is this "Power" and "flame-whirl" mentioned in 'Inconscient' and the "ancient Force" mentioned in 'Evolution'? There is, perhaps, a kinship between this Force or Power and the "Combatant" of Nikos Kazantzakis:

Then suddenly a great light was born within me:

¹¹⁶ *Last Poems*, p. 8. ¹¹⁷ *More Poems*, p. 77. ¹¹⁸ *Last Poems*, p. 48.

the transmutation of matter into spirit. Here was the great secret, the red ribbon followed by the Combatant.... I now clearly saw the progress of the Invisible, and suddenly I knew what my duty was to be: to work in harmony together with that Combatant; to transmute, even I, in my own small capacity, matter into spirit....¹¹⁹

If Evolution is the adventure of consciousness, world-existence is the ecstatic dance of Shiva — of Kali — of Krishna. While, Kali's feet measure "in rhythms of pain and grief and change Life's game of hazard terrible and sweet", Krishna's dance will radiate "sweetness, laughter, rapture, love".¹²⁰ When Shiva turns to the Mighty Mother, Half now awake she rises to his glance;

Then, moved to circling by her heart-beats' will,

The rhythmic worlds describe that passion-dance.

Life springs in her and Mind is born; her face

She lifts to Him who is Herself, until

The Spirit leaps into the Spirit's embrace.¹²¹

This ecstasy of world-existence is not the gods' alone but is also within reach of the realised man. Mortal man can find in himself "the door to immortality", and he can with his cosmic consciousness see himself in all things and all things in himself:

I am a single Self all Nature fills.

Immeasurable, unmoved the Witness sits...

The burning galaxies are in me outlined:

The universe is my stupendous whole...

I share all creatures' sorrow and content

And feel the passage of every stab and kiss...¹²²

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Prema Nandakumar's *A Study of 'Savitri'* (1962), p. 469.

¹²⁰ *More Poems*, p. 62. ¹²¹ *Last Poems*, p. 18.

¹²² *More Poems*, p. 70.

I contain the whole world in my soul's embrace:
 In me Arcturus and Belphegor burn...
 The world's happiness flows through me like wine,
 Its million sorrows are my agonies...¹²³

I have learned a close identity with all,
 Yet am by nothing bound that I become;
 Carrying in me the universe's call
 I mount to my imperishable home...¹²⁴

Each finite thing I see is a façade:
 From its windows looks at me the Illimitable.
 In vain was my prison of separate body made;
 His occult presence burns in every cell...¹²⁵

To have won this light of cosmic consciousness is also to participate in the 'Bliss of Brahman', to "become a foam-white sea of bliss... a curling wave of God's delight".¹²⁶

It is natural for the materialist to imagine that the so-called "marvels of modern science" have emptied existence of all significant mystery. But isn't it an oversimplification to declare that the world is run by "electric hordes", that "an algebra of mind, a scheme of sense, a symbol language" can really pluck the heart of the cosmic puzzle?¹²⁷ In 'A Dream of Surreal Science' Sri Aurobindo has summed up the Materialist Denial with a touch of whimsy:

One dreamed and saw a gland write Hamlet, drink
 At the Mermaid, capture immortality;

¹²³ *Last Poems*, p. 2 ('The Indwelling Universal').

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 9 ('Cosmic Consciousness').

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35 ('Omnipresence').

¹²⁶ *More Poems*, p. 69.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

A committee of hormones on the Aegean's brink
 Composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.
 A thyroid, meditating almost nude
 Under the Bo-tree, saw the eternal Light
 And, rising from its mighty solitude,
 Spoke of the Wheel and the eightfold Path all right.
 A brain by a disordered stomach driven
 Thundered through Europe, conquered, ruled and
 fell,
 From St. Helena went, perhaps, to Heaven.
 Thus wagged on the surreal world, until
 A scientist played with atoms and blew out
 The universe before God had time to shout.¹²⁸

This sonnet is dated 25 September 1939, and was thus written nearly five years before the atomic bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The fact of the matter is that what we think is the end of the affair is rather the beginning. Our science “sees all things in *outward* carved relief” and doesn’t realise that “the visible has its roots in the unseen”.¹²⁹ The deeper insights find recordation in the sonnet ‘Electron’:

The electron on which forms and worlds are built,
 Leaped into being, a particle of God.
 A spark from the eternal Energy spilt.
 It is the Infinite's blind minute abode.
 In that small flaming chariot Shiva rides...

Atom and molecule in their unseen plan
Buttress an edifice of strange onenesses,
Crystal and plant, insect and beast and man, —
Man on whom the World-Unity shall seize,

¹²⁸ *Last Poems*, p. 27.

¹²⁹ *More Poems*, p. 76.

Widening his soul-spark to an epiphany
Of the timeless vastness of Infinity.¹³⁰

And so, in sonnet after sonnet, the scientist and the thinker are surpassed by the mystic, and the mystic sees what the eye cannot see, what the most complicated machines cannot record, what the latest sophistication in mathematical physics cannot infer. From the depths of Inconscience to the summits of Superconscience is one marvellous arc of existence, one tremendous spiral of evolution; and the many worlds are also One World, even in the deepest mire the Divine is veiled or coiled, and even the giddiest Everests of the Spirit are susceptible to the obscure pulls towards the stark densities of Matter. If in 'Thought the Paraclete' there is graphed the ascent to the "vastness of God", in sonnets like 'The Pilgrim of the Night' there is described — as in 'A God's Labour' — a determined plunge into the Abyss:

I made an assignation with the Night;
In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:
In my breast carrying God's deathless light
I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.
I left the glory of the illumined Mind
And the calm rapture of the divinised soul
And travelled through a vastness dim and blind
To the grey shore where her ignorant waters roll.
I walk by the chill wave through the dull slime
And still that weary journeying knows no end:
Lost is the lustrous godhead beyond Time,
There comes no voice of the celestial Friend,
And yet I know my footprints' track shall be
A pathway towards Immortality.¹³¹

The first draft of the above — describing the descent

¹³⁰ *Last Poems*, p. 3. ¹³¹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

into the Night (more fully and overwhelmingly described in *Savitri*, Book II, Canto vii) — was made in July 1938 and the final draft in March 1944. Here all is dull slime and tartarean dark, although Hope lingers still; in 'The Infinite Adventure', written in September 1939, the worst is already over, and there is seen a pointing light:

An unseen Hand controls my rudder. Night
 Walls up the sea in a black corridor, —
 An unconscious Hunger's lion plaint and roar
 Or the ocean sleep of a dead Eremite.¹³²

In subsequent mystic affirmations, the poet is revealed as being equally at home whether on the peaks or in the depths:

Light, endless Light! darkness has room no more
 Life's ignorant gulfs give up their secrecy...
 I move in an ocean of stupendous Light
 Joining my depths to His eternal height...¹³³
 Arisen to voiceless unattainable peaks
 I meet no end, for all is boundless He.
 An absolute joy the wide-winged spirit seeks,
 A Might, a Presence, an Eternity.
 In the unconscious dreadful dumb Abyss
 Are heard the heart-beats of the Infinite.
 The insensible midnight veils His trance of bliss,
 A fathomless sealed astonishment of Light....¹³⁴
 All forms are Thy dream-dialect of delight.
 O Absolute, O vivid Infinite.¹³⁵

Revelatory, epiphanic, these pointer-readings in the interior occult countries of the world-stair are the prelude airs to the *Divina Commedia* that is *Savitri*.

¹³² *ibid.*, p. 12. ¹³³ *ibid.*, p. 32. ¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 40. ¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SAVITRI

I

The Savitri story is of great antiquity. It was already ancient at the time of the *Mahabharata* events, for it was one of the stories that Rishi Markandeya narrated to Yudhishtira during the years of his exile to console him and fortify his spirit. Several of Sri Aurobindo's narrative poems or fragments — *Love and Death*, *Vidula*, *Chitrangada*, *Uloupy*, *Nala* — were based on, or translated from, the *Mahabharata*, yet the fascination was inexhaustible, and in particular the Savitri story, like the Nala story, had a special attraction for Sri Aurobindo as embodying the early morning glory of Rishi Vyasa's poetic genius:

The *Savitri* is a maturer and nobler work (than the *Nala*), perfect and restrained in detail, but it has still some glow of the same youth and grace over it. This then is the rare charm of these two poems that we find there the soul of the pale and marble Rishi.... Young, a Brahmacharin and a student, Vyasa dwelt with the green silences of the earth, felt the fascination and loneliness of the forests... in the *Savitri*, what a tremendous figure a romantic poet would have made of Death, what a passionate struggle between the human being and the master of tears and partings! But Vyasa would have none of this; he had one object, to paint the power of a woman's silent love.... There have been plenty of poets who could have given us imagina-

tive and passionate pictures of Love struggling with Death, but there has been only one who could give us a Savitri.¹

Sri Aurobindo commenced a blank verse translation of the Tale of Nala, but only about 150 lines have survived. The Savitri story, however, gripped him even more, and he seems to have planned an epyllion, a companion-piece to *Urvashi* and *Love and Death*. In *Urvashi*, when the heroine returns to heaven, Pururavas has to follow and be united with her there, abandoning his kingdom on earth. In *Love and Death*, when Priyumnada dies stung by a snake, Ruru seeks her out in Patala (Hades), makes a deal with the Lord of Death's Other Kingdom, and returns with her to the earth. The theme is love, and separation, and the power of Love to achieve reunion.

But in the Savitri story, the protagonist is the heroine, not the hero, and hence of love stories it is altogether unique. Sri Aurobindo started on his version of *Savitri* in the Baroda period, perhaps as early as the turn of the century, but presently he laid it aside on account of other preoccupations. It was to have been a poem in two Parts — Part I: Earth, and Part II: Beyond — with four Books in Part I and three Books and an Epilogue in Part II.² All this was years before the Mother arrived, and before Sri Aurobindo had any clear notion of the Supramental world. As was his habit, he no doubt returned to the poem from time to time, but it was only in the early thirties that the work of revision was taken up earnestly. He had retired into complete seclusion on 24 November 1926 having won a new height of realisation, and perhaps he wished to make the revised *Savitri*

¹ *Vyasa and Valmiki* (1961), pp. 21-4. ² *Savitri* (1954), pp. 822-3.

a channel for the communication of some ambrosial new insights or of some new power of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo seems to have told the Mother at the time he took up *Savitri* again:

I am impelled to launch on a new adventure.... I was hesitant at the beginning, but now I am decided. Still I do not know how far I shall succeed.... I have launched myself in a rudderless boat upon the vastness of the Infinite.³

After *The Life Divine*, after *The Synthesis of Yoga*, after *The Secret of the Veda* and *Essays on the Gita*, after *The Mother* and *The Ridiculous of This World*, — what was there to say? Sadhaks who came to know vaguely about Sri Aurobindo's new experiment in poetic creation were duly intrigued. One or two ventured to make inquiries. Was the new *Savitri* no more than a revision of the earlier draft? Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple in 1931:

There is a previous draft, the result of many retouchings... but in that form... it would have been a legend and not a symbol. I therefore started recasting the whole thing; only the best passages and lines of the old draft will remain, altered so as to fit into the new frame.⁴

He was then at "the new form of the first Book", coming to it "once a month perhaps", making such changes as inspiration dictated to him. And so the revision, the recasting, continued at a leisurely pace. In a letter written in 1932, he explained that the blank verse of *Savitri* was "an attempt to catch something of the Upanishadic and Kalidasian movement" in English, but his success could

³ The Mother to a sadhak on 5 November 1967.

⁴ *Savitri*, p. 821.

be known only when two or three Books were finished. Even in 1934, he was still at Book I, "working on it over and over again with the hope that every line may be of a perfect perfection". Two years later he wrote: "The first Book has been lengthening and lengthening out"; and most of it was new. The direction of revision was towards the "Overhead" levels, and the general movement was towards "a possible Overmind poetry".⁵ On the other hand, it was not a matter of mere technical progression. Technical mastery had come to him incidentally, but still it was the force of the inspiration that decided things, the mind as such hardly intervening in the composition of the lines. Of what use, after all, was deliberate contrivance in something so unpredictable as poetry? "The two agents are sight and call", Sri Aurobindo wrote: "Also feeling — the solar plexus has to be satisfied".⁶

In the course of 1936, K. D. Sethna was able to persuade Sri Aurobindo to send him a passage of 16 lines from the Exordium, both as a specimen of poetry with an Overmind influence and as a foretaste of the finished *Savitri*. Letters passed between Sethna and Sri Aurobindo carrying their precious load of comment and criticism and poetry and explication, and presently Sethna made a fair copy of a portion of Part I, and Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1938:

...the "Worlds" have fallen into a state of manuscript chaos, corrections upon corrections, additions upon additions, rearrangements on arrangements out of which perhaps some cosmic beauty might emerge!⁷ The original small passage about Aswapathy and the other worlds was ultimately to become, "under the oes-

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 82 f. ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 825. ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 826.

trus of the restless urge for more and more perfection", the long second Book ('The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds') in fifteen cantos. It was all still a closely guarded secret between Sethna and Sri Aurobindo, although some — the Mother certainly and perhaps Nolini and a few others — knew very well what was in the offing.

Then, on the eve of Darshan Day in November 1938, there was an accident and Sri Aurobindo sustained a fracture:

He was passing from... (his study) to his bedroom or the bathroom on the other side. Somehow he slipped on a tiger skin that was on the floor, and his knee struck very hard on the head of the tiger — He fell down and there he lay. He lay down there quietly, he was not calling anybody, there was nobody there except the Mother in the other room.... Humanly he was a person who would never disturb anybody, who would never call anybody unless absolutely necessary.... However, it seems the Mother received a strong vibration in her sleep or in her trance... and felt at once that something had happened to Sri Aurobindo. This is... unity of consciousness. And she came and found Sri Aurobindo lying on the floor. At once answering the emergency call, Purani rushed up...⁸

Dr. Manilal and Dr. Nirod were summoned too, and Sri Aurobindo's body, lying prone on the floor, reminded Nirod of "the golden beauty of a God... the golden Purusha". The right leg had to be put in plaster, and Sri Aurobindo was conveyed to the bed. Wasn't the

⁸ Nirodbaran, *Mother India* ('Our Association with Sri Aurobindo'), February 1970.

writing of *Savitri* something akin to a struggle with Death? The adverse forces were apparently up in arms, and the accident was thus no mere accident. Nolini Kanta Gupta's explanation was that there were war-clouds over Europe in late 1938 (thanks to the Czecho-Slovakian crisis), and very probably Sri Aurobindo "took upon himself the Shadow and avoided its falling on the world for a year".⁹

Be that as it may, when Sri Aurobindo returned to *Savitri* again, it was under slightly different circumstances. In course of time, Nirod became both Sri Aurobindo's medical attendant and amanuensis, and this association was to continue till the very end. There were also conversations in Sri Aurobindo's room, and some privileged few — including Dr. Manilal, Dr. Becharlal, Purani, Champaklal and Nirod — were of the company. The "work in progress", *Savitri*, came up in the course of the talks more than once. On 3 January 1939, for example, Sri Aurobindo said that in his blank verse he had gone back from Shakespeare to Marlowe:

Each line stands by itself and each sentence consists at most of five or six lines.... There are no pauses or enjambments like those in *Paradise Lost*.¹⁰ Again, on 5 March, to a question from Nirod whether Sri Aurobindo would have time to finish *Savitri*, the answer was: "Oh, *Savitri* will take a long time. I have to go all over the old ground.... Every time I find more and more imperfections".

The war years notwithstanding, work on *Savitri* progressed — revisions, cancellations, additions, interlinings, dictation of long passages, wholesale recastings — and by

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* (1966), p. 156.

1946 the first three Books constituting Part I were ready in typescript in almost the final form. Of the remaining two Parts, two Books were ready, while the others had to be revised and finalised or yet to be written. "In the new form", Sri Aurobindo explained, "it will be a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life much profounder in its substance and vaster in its scope than was intended in the original form."¹¹

Already, in his article in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual 1943*, K. D. Sethna had made a meaningful reference to *Savitri*, which was to be the poetic counterpart — or more than counterpart — to the philosophical treatise, *The Life Divine*. Surmise and expectancy were at fever-pitch when the August 1946 issue of *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* carried the first Canto 'The Symbol Dawn', along with Sri Aurobindo's essay on Mystic Poetry; and the *Advent* (August 1946) published fifty lines from Canto IV ('The Secret Knowledge'). How packed with epiphanic suggestiveness was the opening asseveration: *It was the hour before the Gods awake!* The unfolding hour brought to our gaze the "dawn" of *Savitri* itself, and it was as though

A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge

One lucent corner windowing hidden things

Forced the world's blind immensity to sight...¹²

Or almost one felt, as the rhythms found their way to the ear and slowly sank in the depths of one's consciousness, one felt that the alluring spiritscapes were uncannily invoked by the lines in 'The Secret Knowledge':

Our early approaches to the Infinite

Are sunrise splendours on a marvellous verge

¹¹ *Savitri*, p. 827.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 5.

While lingers yet unseen the glorious sun...

And Nature trembles with the power, the flame.¹³

Sahṛdayas or lovers of poetry were a little impatient, though; and an anonymous reviewer said in the November 1946 issue of the *Advent*:

But a little more does not satisfy us, whose appetite whets the more it feeds, and we look forward to the Divine whole of *Savitri*, at which he (Sri Aurobindo) has been working over so many years. But truly speaking, even with the opening Canto, 'The Symbol Dawn', *Savitri* had arrived and begun her reign. The February 1947 issue of the *Advent* editorially declared:

Savitri, the Divine Grace in human form, is upon earth. The Divine Consciousness has abandoned its own Supramental transcendental status to enter into the human consciousness and partake of the earthly life....

More Cantos appeared in the ensuing months, and in the *Advent* of 1948, there was again another editorial comment, this time on the second Canto ('The Issue') of Book I:

The Divine Consciousness descending into earthly life as Grace and taking a human form is a mystic, a supremely mysterious phenomenon.... The Grace grips Evil at its very source... the Light strikes the source itself from where it issues Darkness. And the embodied Descent means the cancellation of the reign of Ignorance.

When the long Book II ('The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds') appeared, Sri Krishnaprem (Ronald Nixon) wrote in *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* (1948):

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 53, 55.

Sri Aurobindo has closed a gulf that has yawned in the human psyche for many many centuries. In the ancient world, poetry... was — above all — revelation. Its subject matter was the eternal truth which dwells in the heart of all life.... The poet... was the Seer, the Prophet, the Magician, and his speech was mantra and enchantment....

Gradually, with the rise of this self-arrogating power (the separative mind, that 'slayer of the soul').... one became two and head sundered itself from heart, knowledge from feeling...

In this poem (*Savitri*) the fissure has been closed. *Savitri*... is neither subjective fancy nor yet mere philosophical thought, but vision and revelation of the actual inner structure of the Cosmos and of the pilgrim of life within its sphere — Bhu, Bhuv, Swar: the Stairway of the Worlds reveals itself to our gaze — worlds of Light above, worlds of Darkness below — and we see also ever-circling life ("kindled in measure and quenched in measure").... Poetry is indeed the full manifestation of the Logos, and when, as here, it is no mere iridescence dependent on some special standpoint, but the wondrous structure of the mighty Cosmos, the 'Adorned One', that is revealed, then in truth does it manifest in its full, its highest grandeur.... It is an omen of the utmost significance and hope that in these years of darkness and despair such a poem as *Savitri* should have appeared. Let us salute the Dawn.

The sunrise of *Savitri* was now hastened, and Books I-III appeared in 1950 as the first Volume of *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. It was evident that the work as a whole too was nearing completion.

In the forties it became Sri Aurobindo's habit — and more and more as the years passed — to dictate rather than write, the unfailing Nirod being the Vinayaka for this modern Vyasa. *Savitri* was now a major preoccupation with Sri Aurobindo, and once he dictated four to five hundred lines without a break, "whose beauty and flow", says Nirodbaran, "were a delight for their sweep of cosmic vision and their magical language". By 1950, it was as though a sense of urgency had seized even the unhurried imperturbable Sri Aurobindo. "I want to finish *Savitri* soon", he told Nirod, and the dictations continued as if there was now a race with time. Towards the end of 1950, Sri Aurobindo dictated the long second Canto ('The Way of Fate and the Problem of Pain') of 'The Book of Fate'. Only 'The Book of Death' and the Epilogue ('The Return to Earth') remained to be revised and amplified in consonance with the rest of the work. Once, on being reminded of these unfinished Books, Sri Aurobindo merely said: "Oh, that? We shall see about that afterwards". But this was not to be. Left apparently unfinalised, these Books along with the others that had been fully revised or recast, were published as the second Volume (Parts II and III) of *Savitri* in 1951, and the entire work came out in 1954 in a one-volume edition, followed by Sri Aurobindo's elucidatory letters on the poem. It had been almost fifty years a-growing, not in bulk alone, but even more through its conquest of ever rising heights of Consciousness, — a phenomenon in poetic creation that has been compared by K. D. Sethna with Goethe's *Faust*.¹¹ When the whole epic of nearly 24,000 lines was at last revealed to the gaze, many at first felt frightened and turned away, but a few — and

¹¹ *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 114.

more and more as the months and years passed — came to feel that here was the greatest epic after Dante and Milton, perhaps the greatest epic of all time. Thus a Western philosopher-critic, Raymond Frank Piper:

We know we must resort to the art of poetry for expressing, to the fullest possible artistic limits, the yearning and battles of mankind for eternal life.... During a period of nearly fifty years... he (Sri Aurobindo) created what is probably the greatest epic in the English language.... I venture the judgement that it is the most comprehensive, integrated, beautiful and perfect cosmic poem ever composed. It ranges symbolically from a primordial cosmic void, through earth's darkness and struggles, to the highest realms of Supramental spiritual existence, and illumines every important concern of man, through verse of unparalleled massiveness, magnificence, and metaphorical brilliance.

Savitri is perhaps the most powerful artistic work in the world for expanding man's mind towards the Absolute.¹⁵

II

The doubt returns: After the stupendous *Arya* sequences, where was the necessity for yet another massive effort of literary creation? Sri Aurobindo had written poems and plays enough, and it couldn't therefore have been any desire for fresh poetic laurels that led to the embarkation on the *Savitri* adventure. In *The Life Divine* he had structured his Supramental Manifesto; in

¹⁵ *The Hungry Eye: An Introduction to Cosmic Art* pp. 131-2.

The Human Cycle and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, he had indicated the contours of the future society and the future humanity; and in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he had set forth the dynamics of the integral Yoga that were to be the means of self-perfection and world-transformation. What, then, remained?

It was decreed indeed that man should change, and his world should change, and that the Superman or the Supramentalised man of tomorrow inhabiting a transformed world or supernature should render equal earth and heaven, transfiguring our life mundane with its blots of "death, desire and incapacity" into the Life Divine with its immaculate intensities, life-movements and realisations. The Life Divine was the goal and Supramental Yoga the means, and the New Man should as it were break out of the shell of existing humanity. Sri Aurobindo could *see* it all very clearly, and he had explained everything in a manner that should carry conviction. And yet,—perhaps something more could be done; the thing decreed could be *shown* as happening! The drama of man's and earth's transcendence into the splendours and imperatives of the Life Divine could be enacted in terms of stern causality, involving the reader too in the dynamics of the transformation. The truths of philosophy are abstractions to be cognised by the ratiocinative mind, but the truths of poetry are to be experienced. And this is equally true of mystic poetry, which is verily of the stuff of spirituality. For Sri Aurobindo, spirituality meant no escape from reality, from the demands of life here and now; spirituality was but a creative force by means of which flawed reality could be seized and purified and transformed, and this world of division and darkness and impotence and death

transfigured into the Life Divine with its soul-marks of Love and Light and Power and Immortality.

We might, on a superficial view, look upon *Savitri* as the account of something that happened long ago — “in far past times when the whole thing had to be opened”. In the *Mahabharata*, it is the story of an individual victory over death; or rather, the story of Yama’s boon of her husband’s life to a chaste and noble wife. Surely, Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* is much more than that. Is it the forecast of something that is to happen in the future? Alas, Death still stalks in our midst, his misrule is as rampant as ever! Should *Savitri*, then, be read only as a fantasy, or as fantasy fused with racial memory, — perhaps as a Vision, perhaps as prophecy? Perhaps, *Savitri* is a recordation of something actually happening right now! The fight against Death is going on — Death with its negations, corruptions, perversions; and the battle has been joined — it is now being waged before our eyes, and we could see it had we eyes to see, or if we didn’t turn them away in fear or disgust. And the whole battle is being fought to open ways to Immortality, and Love — Love armed with Power — has to fight this battle of renewal, of purification, and of glorification. Truth or the Abyss? The Life Divine — or Annihilation? The issue is joined indeed, and the struggle and the possibility are projected before us. Will Satyavan — the soul of the world that is Satyavan — be redeemed at last and will the world be made safe for the future man? Perhaps, again, *Savitri* is the report, not so much of a witness-poet, but of a participant! It is recordation, prophecy, report, and the unfolding action itself; and in its deepest sense, it is Sri Aurobindo’s own life, and of the Mother’s too, in progressive unravelment.

And for the student of *Savitri*, isn't the very reading of the poem a kind of participation in its spiritual action? *Savitri* is about Satyavan and Savitri, and on a different level about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; and it is about us too — it does something to us, it does involve us in the action that is only superficially about a husband and a wife, but has really a terrestrial, even a cosmic, significance. A dialectic is projected, a drama is played, before us — it is apparently concluded, but the real conclusion is yet to be concluded in the fulness of time. Once we are surrendered, the currents of the poem carry us onward, and we become sharers in the action or participants in the play. *Savitri* is thus a new kind of poem, a poem whose making was Yoga Sadhana and whose reading too should be such Sadhana. "To read *Savitri* is indeed to practise Yoga", the Mother is reported to have told a disciple; "one can find there all that is needed to realise the Divine. Each step in Yoga is noted here, including the secret of other Yogas also".¹⁶ It is thus an advance on *The Life Divine* which is the Groundwork of Knowledge and *The Synthesis of Yoga* which is the Manual of Integral Yoga. In *Savitri*, on the other hand, theory teams with practice. Truth is wedded to Shakti, and both career towards the goals of Realisation. We proceed from the 'what can we know' of *The Life Divine* and the 'what shall we do' of *The Synthesis of Yoga* to the 'what may we hope for' — *tatva*, *hita* and *puruṣārtha* being all fused in *Savitri* into a veritable Life Tree Ygdrasil of spiritual poetry.

After the Overmental realisation of 24 November 1926, Sri Aurobindo probably felt that the preordained spiritual revolution and supramental transformation were

¹⁶ Talk to a sadhak on 5 November 1967, hitherto unpublished.

likely to come about rather sooner than had seemed possible before. This was partly the reason he went into complete seclusion and concentrated on his Yoga; and the writing of *Savitri* became one of the means — perhaps the principal means — of accomplishing his aim. As he once wrote to Nirod:

I used *Savitri* as a means of ascension. I began with it on a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level, I rewrote from that level.... In fact, *Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative.¹⁷

Savitri was thus *sādhana* and recordation in one, and was to be the means of *sādhana* for others. It was still a fresh recital of the old legend, but a recital so charged with power by the symbol-godheads who are the protagonists in the drama that the poem itself could progressively enact in the theatre of our souls the great victory and transformation that are the theme of the poem.

There is one other circumstance, too. In *The Future Poetry*, which had serially appeared in the *Arya*, Sri Aurobindo had speculated on the future of the epic in the age of Overhead Poetry:

The epic, a great poetic story of man or world or the gods, need not necessarily be a vigorous presentation of external action: the divinely appointed creation of Rome, the struggle of the principles of good and evil as presented in the great Indian poems, the pageant of the centuries or the journey of the seer through the three worlds beyond us are

¹⁷ Nirodbaran, *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 202.

as fit themes as primitive war and adventure for the imagination of the epic creator. The epics of the soul most inwardly seen as they will be by an intuitive poetry are his greatest possible subject, and it is this supreme kind that we shall expect from some profound and mighty voice of the future. His indeed may be the song of greatest flight that will reveal from the highest pinnacle and with the largest field of vision the destiny of the human spirit and the presence and ways and purpose of the Divinity in man and the universe.¹⁸

This was written in 1920. Did Sri Aurobindo feel in the years of his complete retirement that it was upto him to attempt this "song of greatest flight"?

The hand-picking of the Savitri legend out of the ocean of stories that is the *Mahabharata* is no less significant. The *Mahabharata* is about the sanguinary strife between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. This 'brother against brother' theme appears with numberless variations in the course of the epic. In the Adi Parva itself, the warring Devas and Asuras — both offspring of Prajapati — churn the ocean to secure *amṛta* or the elixir of immortality. The snakes and Garuda — the natural enemies — are the offspring respectively of the sisters, Kadru and Vinata; and Garuda is asked to get *amṛta* from heaven to secure the freedom of his mother, Vinata. During his journey, he is advised to feast upon the fighting animals, a tortoise and an elephant, who had been in their earlier birth the brothers, Vibhavasū and Supratika. The wages of discord, of egoism, of sin — is death, always death. Where is the armour against death? How shall we make Death itself die? Anything external like *amṛta* could

¹⁸ *The Future Poetry*, pp. 376-7.

prove to be a mockery, as it became to the Asuras and the snakes. All boons for self-preservation, all mechanical paraphernalia of security, all cunning contrivances and edifices of self-deception, all must fail — as fail they did with Hiranyakasipu, Parikshit or Jayadrata. Fear and terror and hate and violence and vindictiveness — like lechery — only hasten the end. But love — the power of love — has an utter sovereignty. The Asuras and the snakes seek *amṛta* out of fear, — the fear of death. Even after quaffing *amṛta*, the Devas are constantly “afraid”. Parikshit desperately tries to keep out the emissary of Death. Jayadrata seeks refuge in the false sundown. But Savitri — alone among the apocalyptic heroes and heroines of the *Mahabharata* — relies on the power within, the invincible power of love:

On the bare peak where Self is alone with Nought
 And life has no sense and love no place to stand,
 She must plead her case upon extinction's verge,
 In the world's death-cave uphold life's helpless claim
 And vindicate her right to be and love...
 Love in her was wider than the universe,
 The whole world could take refuge in her single heart...
 She matched with the iron law her sovereign right:
 Her single will opposed the cosmic rule.¹⁹

Armed with the power of her love, she will face any threat, any adverse force, whatsoever: she will defy and defeat Death itself.

In the original *Mahabharata* story, as in Sri Aurobindo's, the heroine doesn't flinch at the prospect of Satyavan's threatened death, nor even in the face of death or the sight of Yama the Lord of Death. She has prepared for the event, not by securing external aids, but by going

¹⁹ *Savitri*, pp. 16, 19, 24.

within herself and forging the links with her secret Self. She doesn't falter at any time, she doesn't indulge in self-pity, and she doesn't weep when the crisis is upon her. In the course of a conversation on 19 January 1940, Sri Aurobindo remarked that, although in his English version Romesh Chunder Dutt makes Savitri weep, "in the *Mahabharata* there is no trace of it. Even when her heart was being sawed in two, not a single tear appeared in her eye. By making her weep, he (Romesh Chunder) took away the very strength of which Savitri is built".²⁰ It was Savitri's divine solitariness and strength, her propensity to incarnate in herself the will to triumph in a world surrendered to resignation and defeat, and her consciousness of mission and might to rectify the very engines of our incapacity and anguish—it was this radiant vision and experience of Savitri's personality and power that started Sri Aurobindo on this giant undertaking and sustained his inspiration during the long years of the thirties and forties when the supreme cosmic epic was being architected into its many-splendoured form.

III

Savitri, as we now have it, is in twelve Books of forty-nine Cantos. One of the Cantos in Book VII ('The Book of Yoga') carries no title, in Book VIII ('The Book of Death') the first two Cantos are either missing or (what is far more probable) were not written, and Book XII ('Epilogue: The Return to Earth') was apparently not given the final touches of revision. The twelve Books as they stand nevertheless account for over

²⁰ *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, First Series (1959), p. 294.

23,800 lines, though the Mother seems to have once remarked to K. D. Sethna: "There should have been 24,000 lines".²¹ And Sethna has noted the interesting fact that together the title and sub-title — *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* — make twenty-four letters!

On a first approach, *Savitri* is apt to scare away the modern reader who is generally too much in a hurry. Not only its sheer mass and its unconventional structure, but even more its unfamiliar content made up largely of the occult and the incomprehensible, must raise barriers between the poem and its potential readers. The main narrative takes up no more than fourteen Cantos (I. 1 and 2; IV. 1-4; V. 1-3; VI. 1-2; VII. 1; VIII. 3; and XII), while the remaining thirty-five Cantos are about Aswathya's Yoga, Savitri's Yoga, and Savitri's redeemer's-progress through the occult worlds of Eternal Night, Double Twilight and Everlasting Day. And yet such a mechanical attempt to separate the narrative from the non-narrative part could be misleading in the extreme. The poem has to be seen as a unity, an organic wholeness and fulness of revelation.

The "action" of the poem opens in the "hour before the Gods awake" — the hour presaging the "dawn", and the "dawn" itself heralding the "day when Satyavan must die". The opening Canto — 'The Symbol Dawn' — is, in Sri Aurobindo's words, "a key beginning and an announcement", for the cosmic symbol dawn signifying the waking up from the swoon of Inconscience, the physical dawn over the cluster of forest hermitages, and the awakening of Savitri or her descent into earth-consciousness from the ineffable altitudes of the Spirit, all fuse into the dawn of the day "when Satyavan must die":

²¹ *Mother India*, June 1971, p. 328.

An unshaped consciousness desired light
 And a blank prescience yearned towards distant
 change...

Arrived from the other side of boundlessness
 An eye of deity pierced through the dumb depths...
 Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
 Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
 Outpoured the revelation and the flame...
 At the summons of her body's voiceless call
 Her strong far-winged spirit travelled back,
 Back to the yoke of ignorance and fate,
 Back to the labour and stress of mortal days,
 Lighting a pathway through strange symbol dreams
 Across the ebbing of the seas of sleep.²²

And the poem ends, at the end of the day, in the silent
 night that is to precede another Dawn:

Night, splendid with the moon dreaming in heaven
 In silver peace, possessed her luminous reign.
 She brooded through her stillness on a thought
 Deep-guarded by her mystic folds of light,
 And in her bosom nursed a greater dawn.²³

From "dawn" to a "greater dawn" is the whole arc of
 the poem's "action", and a momentous something that
 happens during the day will transform the next dawn
 and make it a "greater dawn" — not a dawn that sees
 the Gods alone awake, but a dawn that finds earth the
 kin-soil of heaven and men who are one with the Gods.
 The "something" that happens during the day — why it
 happens and how, and who makes it happen — is the
 theme of the poem.

What happens is the defeat — or rather the transmu-
 tation, transfiguration — of Death. Yama is not men-

²² *Savitri*, pp. 4-5, 6, 12-3. ²³ *ibid.*, p. 800.

tioned by name; always the sinister and dark Power figures as Death. Life and love and the soul's freedom are in utter jeopardy because of the seeming omnipotence of Death. It is the classic theme, the one fundamental theme, of all great poetry. We are afraid, afraid — of the dark, of defeat, of death. We are born but to die, we reason but to err, and we are daunted at every turn. Thus the first verse of *The Divine Comedy*:

In the middle of my life, I found myself in a dark
wood, and lost my way....

Dante is afraid, and fear is the precursor of death. He has to traverse the three worlds of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven before he can find an answer to this fear and this terror — he finds the answer in Beatrice and Love, "the love that moves the Sun and the other stars". In the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, again, there is reference both to the awesome phenomenon of Death and the answer provided by the Son of Man who is also the Son of God:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse....

There is a fall, and there is a rise again; there is death, and death is exceeded by the power of the Redeemer's love. In the *Mahabharata*, it is fear, fear, all the time — and the other passions too: *kāma*, *krodha*, *lobha*, and *moha* — and, above all, the failure of compassion and love. In Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, the Evil — not its endless manifestations — the Evil itself is confronted and checkmated, and not so much destroyed as radically

changed in its character: Death the Lord of Darkness becomes the Lord of Light, and death gives place to Everlasting Life!

Death, Love, Truth — Yama, Savitri, Satyavan — the symbols and the legendary characters simultaneously fill the expanse of the epic, and it is not easy, it is not wise, to separate the symbol from the legend. In the course of a conversation, Sri Aurobindo said in 1939 that, even in the *Mahabharata*, the Savitri story was symbolic, although the popular view was to take it merely as a tale of conjugal fidelity. Asked to spell out the symbolism, he went on:

Well, Satyavan whom Savitri marries, is the symbol of the Soul descended into the Kingdom of Death; and Savitri... the Goddess of Divine Light and Knowledge comes down to redeem Satyavan from Death's grasp.²⁴

In a more detailed note on the subject, Sri Aurobindo further underlines the symbolic intention and implications:

...this legend is... one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapathy, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of vision, and through

²⁴ Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* (1966), p. 155.

that loss its kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch, and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life.²⁵

The characters, then, are at once symbol-powers and real human beings. They didn't figure in the mythic past alone, but are also constituents of the current climate of striving and pressing towards the future. And what — or who — is Narad, the other important character in the drama? Isn't he the necessary catalytic agent that prods the "action" towards the desired consummation? Narad in Aswapathy's Court affects King, Queen and Savitri differently, yet the diverse reactions coalesce towards the same end: the crystallisation of Savitri's shining purpose to stake all for the Soul of Truth and win all through the Power of Love:

My will is part of the eternal will,
 My fate is what my spirit's strength can make,
 My fate is what my spirit's strength can bear;
 My strength is not the titan's, it is God's....
 I have seen God smile at me in Satyavan;
 I have seen the Eternal in a human face.²⁶

And the poet adds: "Then none could answer to her words".

Dyumatsena, the fallen King caged in the mind, sees if at all as through a fog dimly, but Aswapathy the King-Forerunner breaks out of the mental cage, explores the "vast of God", confronts the Divine Mother, and

²⁵ *Mother India*, June 1971, p. 312. ²⁶ *Savitri*, pp. 493-4.

secures the boon of Her descent to earth. It may be asked: Why should the Infinite, the omnipotent, thus agree to limit itself? Omnipotence, however, includes also the power of self-limitation, and the power of uniting the finite and the infinite. The Avatar both brings the heavens down and raises the earth to heaven; he (or she) is a living example for humanity, the average in appearance who is a positive ideal as well, the normal by birth and upbringing who grows supernormal dimensions of consciousness — the bringer of light and love and power, and above all the advanced Scout for the race as a whole. As the *Advent* wrote editorially in its April 1948 issue:

The personality that incarnates it (the Avatar) belongs at the same time to two apparently incompatible and contrary worlds and possesses a dual character. Within, it harbours the Divine, is the Divine, fully conscious of its sovereign potency above the laws of a mortal life of ignorance; without, it embraces this world too, this play of inconscience and limitation. The two confront each other in the Incarnation with equal potency and in magic interaction.

So it is with Savitri. On the fateful day — "Twelve passionate months led in a day of fate"²⁷ — Savitri wakes up too like the rest of the forest folk, wakes up from her withdrawn divinity to conscious humanity, and slowly her double role becomes clear to her:

To live with grief, to confront death on her road, —

The mortal's lot became the Immortal's share.

Thus trapped in the gin of earthly destinies,

Awaiting her ordeal's hour abode,

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 15.

Outcast from her inborn felicity,
 Accepting life's obscure terrestrial robe,
 Hiding herself even from those she loved,
 The godhead greater by a human fate.²⁸

The familiar *Mahabharata* story of Savitri and Satyavan certainly brings out the compelling power of a wife's chastity to effect a change of heart even in the obdurate Lord of Death. That tale itself, with its clear bold outlines, partakes of the sublime, and Winternitz has aptly called it "the wonderful poem of faithful Savitri".²⁹ The incommensurable power of love was constantly in Sri Aurobindo's mind, as may be inferred from the role given to it in Sri Aurobindo's earlier poems and plays. For example, these words are put into the mouth of Eric King of Norway:

Some day surely

The world too shall be saved from death by Love.³⁰

But in Sri Aurobindo's epic, Savitri is the Avatar of the Divine Mother and not alone Satyavan's wife. The aim of her great endeavour would be, not just to fulfil a personal need or to resist a personal danger, but primarily to hasten the cosmic evolution and to promote a global human realisation. On the day of days, she is in readiness, certainly to fight the danger to Satyavan's life, but even more to get at the Evil itself, and purify and change it altogether:

To wrestle with the Shadow she had come
 And must confront the riddle of man's birth
 And life's brief struggle in dumb Matter's night.³¹

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 10-1.

²⁹ *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, translated by Mrs. S. Ketkar, p. 397.

³⁰ *Eric* (1960), p. 74. ³¹ *Savitri*, p. 21.

Dyumatsena's "blindness", Satyavan's "death", — gradations and intensities of darkness! Must one acquiesce in their finality? But utterly to defeat darkness anywhere is to destroy it everywhere. Not Dyumatsena's blindness, nor Satyavan's death, is the problem: these are but the ripples on the surface, not the unplumbed ocean itself. It is Death — the evil Shadow — the giant Ignorance — that has to be frontally tackled, beaten back, and forced to knuckle under. It is much more than a distressing conjugal problem, more even than a recurring human problem; it is a cosmic problem, it is a crisis in earth's evolutionary history. And the Divine Mother has come down as Power and Grace to defeat the Shadow and redeem the "soul of the world that is Satyavan".

IV

The background infinities and cosmic significances notwithstanding, the splendour of the eternal feminine that is Savitri is not ignored either. She is divine, she is human; and she is all the more divine because she is human too, and she is the more adorably human because she is also radiantly divine:

Near to earth's wideness, intimate with heaven,
Exalted and swift her young large-visioned spirit
Voyaging through worlds of splendour and of calm
Overflow the ways of Thought to unborn things.
Ardent was her self-poised unstumbling will;
Her mind, a sea of white sincerity,
Passionate in flow, had not one turbid wave.
As in a mystic dynamic dance
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies

Inspired and ruled from Truth's revealing vault
 Moves in some prophet cavern of the gods,
 A heart of silence in the hands of joy
 Inhabited with rich creative beats
 A body like a parable of dawn
 That seemed a niche for veiled divinity
 Or golden temple door to things beyond.
 Immortal rhythms swayed in her time-born steps;
 Her look, her smile awoke celestial sense
 Even in earth-stuff, and their intense delight
 Poured a supernal beauty on men's lives.³²

The predestined "day", the imminent trial of strength between the cosmic protagonists, and Savitri's self-poised sublime alertness for the event: the 'exposition' of the drama to be played in the symbol theatre of evolutionary possibilities is now almost complete. There is now a halt in the action. Time suddenly takes a leap backwards, and we are permitted to peer into the origins or the aetiology of the threatened confrontation: *A world's desire compelled her mortal birth.*³³ And so we are winged back to the days of Aswapathy's first awakening — his perception of the heavy and weary weight of this unintelligible world, his soul's breakthrough to freedom, his crystal-gazing into the 'Secret Knowledge', his exploration of the occult stairway of the worlds.

The main bulk of *Savitri* is made up of three hard blocks: Aswapathy's Yoga (I. 3-5, II and III), Savitri's Yoga (VII. 2-7), and the Savitri-Yama confrontation (IX, X and XI). In between, there is the story of Savitri's birth and blossoming into womanhood, of her choice of Satyavan as her spouse, of Narad's peep into predestination, of the year of holy wedded life, and of

³² *ibid.*, pp. 18-9. ³³ *ibid.*, p. 26.

Satyavan's death in the forest (IV, V, VI, VII. 1 and VIII). The 'Epilogue' describes Savitri's "return to earth" with Satyavan.

Aswapathy's Yoga is the Yoga of self-knowledge and world-knowledge, the Yoga of Aspiration, the Yoga of the Forerunner who makes Savitri's advent possible. Starting with unease and uncertainty, Aswapathy achieves his soul's release through a psychic opening and spiritual change. He is able to break through the shell of egoistic separativity:

He felt the beating life in other men
 Invade him with their happiness and their grief;
 Their love, their anger, their unspoken hopes
 Entered in currents or in pouring waves
 Into the immobile ocean of his calm.³⁴

Beyond this universal or cosmic experience there is the Nirvanic absolute silence, and Aswapathy wins his way to its supernal calm:

There only were Silence and the Absolute...
 He plunged his roots into the Infinite,
 He based his life upon Eternity.³⁵

And when he returns to consciousness after this baptism in the waters of transcendence, he has won "his soul's release from Ignorance":

A wide God-knowledge poured down from above,
 A new world-knowledge broadened from within...
 A genius heightened in his body's cells
 That knew the meaning of his fate-hedged works.³⁶

His body's cells have themselves grown conscious of their divine affiliations. From this high plane of spiritual change, Aswapathy seeks corroboration in the 'Secret Knowledge' or the received perennial philosophy, and

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 31. ³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39. ³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 51.

he proceeds from the Ground of such knowledge to a heightened spiritual power of penetration into all the continents of cosmic life and experience. But before the start of his adventure into the occult worlds he is for a while caught between primordial opposing forces:

He climbed to meet the infinite more above...

Opponent of that glory of escape,

The black Inconscient swung its dragon tail

Lashing a slumberous Infinite by its force

Into the deep obscurities of form:

Death lay beneath him like a gate of sleep.

One-pointed to the immaculate Delight,

Questing for God as for a splendid prey,

He mounted burning like a cone of fire.

To a few is given that godlike rare release.³⁷

As he rises thus, shaking off the Inconscient, he is met by "a Might, a Flame" which envelops him "with its stupendous limbs", and he is now able to invade the occult Invisible:

A voyager upon uncharted routes

Fronting the danger of the Unknown,

Adventuring across enormous realms,

He broke into another Space and Time.³⁸

After a *divina-commedia*-like journey covering the world-stair —

Ascending and descending twixt life's poles

The serried kingdoms of the graded Law —³⁹

Aswapathy dares yet another ascent of aspiration as leader and representative of the race. The world-stair is not one world but all possible worlds, all the worlds together, and beyond our notions of space and time; the centre is everywhere, the circumference is nowhere.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 90. ³⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 103-4. ³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 100.

Dante's triple worlds, although superficially geographical, are actually psychological states. Where Dante is religious, theological and mediaeval, Sri Aurobindo is spiritual, scientific and modern; what Dante did with such superb psychological and clinical precision for *his* time, Sri Aurobindo has done for *our* time.

For Aswapathy himself, the whole arc of occult experience between the poles of superconscience and inconscience has already been covered in its entirety, and he is beyond all knowledges, all experiences:

He had reached the top of all that can be known:

His sight surpassed creation's head and base;

Ablaze the triple heavens revealed their suns.

The obscure Abyss exposed its monstrous rule...⁴⁰

But how about the rest of mankind? What he aspires for is not a personal solution but a universal realisation and a new creation. And so he continues his search for this ultimate solution, and his efforts are rewarded at last:

The Presence he yearned for suddenly drew close...

The undying Truth appeared, the enduring Power

Of all that here is made and then destroyed,

The Mother of all godheads and all strengths

Who, mediatrix, binds earth to the Supreme...

She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire.

The luminous heart of the Unknown is she.⁴¹

He is advised to be content with what he has won but ask no more for the earth or the race as a whole. But Aswapathy will not be so easily put off, and he makes reply to the Divine Mother:

How shall I rest content with mortal days

And the dull measure of terrestrial things.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 340. ⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 353, 354, 356.

I who have seen behind the cosmic mask
 The glory and the beauty of thy face?...
 Let thy infinity in one body live,
 All-Knowledge wrap one mind in seas of light,
 All-Love throb single in one human heart...
 Let a great word be spoken from the heights
 And one great act unlock the doors of Fate.⁴²
 And the Mother gives her consenting voice:
 O strong forerunner, I have heard thy cry.
 One shall descend and break the iron law,
 Change Nature's doom by the lone Spirit's power...
 A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour,
 A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;
 Nature shall overleap her mortal step;
 Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will.⁴³
 Thus Savitri comes into the world, not simply to satisfy
 a childless King's desire for issue, but truly to fulfil
 Aswapathy's great aspiration and prayer on behalf of
 long-suffering earth.
 There is now Nature's preparation for the Advent, and
 the seasons begin with summer and end with spring.
 The seasons are symbolic too, summer of aspiration by
 earth, the field of manifestation, a looking-up to the Sun-
 God for fulfilment; the rainy season, of the boon from
 heaven; the intermediate seasons, of gestation and growth;
 and spring, of the fruit or the new-born Child:
 Answering earth's yearning and her cry for bliss
 A greatness from our other countries came...
 The seasons drew in linked significant dance
 The symbol pageant of the changing year...
 Rain-tide burst in upon torn wings of heat,
 Startled with lightnings air's unquiet drowse,

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 386, 391. ⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 391-2.

Lashed with life-giving streams the torpid soil...
 Three thoughtful seasons passed with shining tread
 And scanning one by one the pregnant hours
 Watched for a flame that lurked in luminous depths,
 The vigil of some mighty birth to come...
 The seed grew into a delicate marvellous bud,
 The bud disclosed a great and heavenly bloom....⁴⁴

From the very moment of her birth, Savitri seems a Child apart, dwelling in a "strong separate air":

An invisible sunlight ran within her veins
 And flooded her brain with heavenly brilliancies
 That woke a wider sight than earth could know.⁴⁵

Albeit she is his dearly-loved daughter, Aswapathy (though not his Queen) is well aware of her divine mission on earth, but not the exact moment in time and of time when time shall be beyonded; nor the manner and place of confrontation of the Shadow; and Savitri knows too, but as yet only obscurely, for the godhead is yet veiled within, her avatar-role among the other protagonists is still a closed book to her. As the years pass and she grows into the perfection of woman's beauty, she no doubt compels admiration, but awes even more; "all worshipped marvellingly, none dared to claim". And once, when she approaches her father, he suddenly sees her with newly-opened eyes:

There came the gift of a revealing hour...
 Transformed the delicate image-face became
 A deeper Nature's self-revealing sign,
 A gold-leaf palimpsest of sacred births.
 A grave world-symbol chiselled out of life...
 A deathless meaning filled her mortal limbs;
 As in a golden vase's poignant line

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 401, 397, 398, 399, 404. ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 405.

They seemed to carry the rhythmic sob of bliss
 Of earth's mute adoration towards heaven
 Released in beauty's cry of living form
 Towards the perfection of living things.⁴⁶

Recognising "the great and unknown spirit born his child", he asks her to go out into the wide world all alone and choose by her soul's light her partner for life.

Her quest is a feast of experience enough:

Her cavern chariot with its fretted wheels
 Threaded through clamorous marts and sentinel towers
 Past figured gates and high dream-sculptured fronts
 And gardens hung in the sapphire of the skies,
 Pillared assembly halls with armoured guards,
 Small fanes where one calm Image watched man's life
 And temples hewn as if by exiled gods
 To imitate their lost eternity.⁴⁷

But it is among "meditation's seats" that she meets the "one for whom her heart had come so far":

A tablet of young wisdom was his brow,
 Freedom's imperious beauty curved his limbs,
 The joy of life was on his open face.
 His look was a wide daybreak of the gods....⁴⁸

It is the re-enactment of the ancient miracle of the dawn and sunrise of Love's marvellous hour. "The meeting and union of Satyavan and Savitri", writes M. V. Seetaraman, "blend all the qualities of romantic, platonic and Christian lovers".⁴⁹ Like the marriage of heaven and earth at dawn ("All grew a consecration and a rite") in the opening Canto, here too the destined meeting of Savitri and Satyavan grows into a mutual consecration and a rite:

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 422-3. ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 430.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 445. ⁴⁹ *The Advent*, August 1964, p. 50.

Then down she came from her high carven car
 Descending with a soft and faltering haste...
 A candid garland set with simple forms
 Her rapid fingers taught a flower song,
 The stanzaed movement of a marriage hymn.
 Profound in perfume and immersed in hue
 They mixed their yearning's coloured signs and made
 The bloom of their purity and passion one.
 A sacrament of joy in treasuring palms
 She brought, flower-symbol of her offered life...
 On the high glowing cupola of the day
 Fate tied a knot with morning's halo threads
 While by the ministry of an auspice-hour
 Heart-bound before the sun, their marriage fire,
 The wedding of the eternal Lord and Spouse
 Took place again on earth in human forms...⁵⁰

On her return to Madra to report her choice, it is Narad's intervention that opens Aswapathy's eyes — and Savitri's own — to the precise nature of the encounter ahead. Narad's warning is thus no warning at all, but merely the adroit opening of the drama of the Book of Fate that is to be played. The long speech that Narad makes, while it fails to carry conviction to the Queen, lights up Aswapathy's eyes with recognition of the unfolding Moment and also helps Savitri to grow aware of her larger role and the direction of the future course of her action. She is already the perfect human wife to Satyavan, and she will presently get ready to confront and confound the Shadow when, as preordained, it chooses to make its appearance. The twelve months of wedded life pass serenely enough, and nobody — not even Satyavan — knows anything about her invisible

⁵⁰ *Savitri*, pp. 463-5.

burden of terrible expectancy. But shortly before the appointed day, Savitri is almost all-human, and feels like giving up the fight. When a Voice summons her to her mission in life ("Arise, O soul, and vanquish Time and Death"), Savitri poses the tell-tale question:

Why should I strive with earth's unyielding laws
Or stave off death's inevitable hour?

This surely is best to pactise with my fate
And follow close behind my lover's steps....⁵¹

The Voice almost admonishes Savitri:

Is this enough, O spirit?

And what shall thy soul say when it wakes and knows
The work was left undone for which it came?...

Find out thy soul, recover thy hid self,

In silence seek God's meaning in thy depths.

Then mortal nature change to the divine.⁵²

It is then that Savitri commences her interiorised Yoga of self-knowledge and preparation for her ordeal. What is she? Surely, not just the immaculate girl-wife of Satyavan apprehensive of the approaching 'Hour of Fate'! Then what *is* she? She now traverses the "inner countries" of matter, life and mind — encounters the triple soul-forces (Madonna of Suffering, Mother of Might, Mother of Light) — door after door opens, veil after veil is pierced, impersonation after impersonation is exposed — and last of all comes the recognition of her seagreen oneness with the Whole:

She was the godhead hid in the heart of man.

She was the climbing of his soul to God.

The cosmos flowered in her, she was its bed...

Eternity looked out from her on Time.⁵³

After all these backward glances that take a sweeping

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 539. ⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 540-1. ⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 632.

view of Savitri's antecedents, Aswapathy's Yoga, the whole architecture and inner substance of the stairway of the worlds, after these long backward leaps into personal history and cosmic evolutionary geography, the main action springs forward in Book VIII ('The Book of Death'), and Savitri follows Satyavan to the forest in the morning of the fateful day, and there is sudden darkness at noon:

Near her she felt a silent shade immense
 Chilling the noon with darkness for its back...
 She knew that visible Death was standing there
 And Satyavan had passed from her embrace.⁵⁴

Left alone in the huge wood, despair doesn't assail her, and tears do not dim her eyes; on the other hand, all in her is taut to face "that mighty hour". Leaving Satyavan's body to rest on the forest soil, she raises her noble head:

...fronting her gaze
 Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand,
 A limitless denial of all being
 That wore the terror and wonder of a shape.
 In its appalling eyes the tenebrous Form
 Bore the deep pity of destroying gods....⁵⁵

Now follows the occult Kurukshetra where Savitri and Death are the arch-antagonists. It is a journey and a struggle, a debate and a dialectic, marked by the steady progression in Death's discomfiture. This Kurukshetra is, indeed, a battlefield on divers fronts: Eternal Night, Double Twilight, Everlasting Day. These symbol worlds signify varieties of temptation, challenge and victory for Savitri. Death tells her that Love is expendable — it is but a foolish sentiment — it is impermanent — it is

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 640. ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 648.

too much of the earth earthy! But Savitri has the right answers for all Death's sinister and seductive sophistries. Negations and sophistries failing, Death challenges Savitri at last to reveal the true Power hiding behind her deceptive human guise: let her lay bare the Truth, then he will yield Satyavan back. And Savitri takes Death at his word and —

A mighty transformation came on her.
A halo of the indwelling Deity,
The Immortal's lustre that had lit her face
And tented its radiance in her body's house,
Overflowing made the air a luminous sea.
In a flaming moment of apocalypse
The Incarnation thrust aside its veil...
Eternity looked into the eyes of Death.
And Darkness saw God's living Reality....⁵⁶

She asks Death to free the "soul of the world called Satyavan" from the "clutch of pain and ignorance", but the Shadow resists Light a little longer:

The two opposed each other face to face.
His being like a huge fort of darkness towered;
Around it her life grew, an ocean's siege...
Light like a burning tongue licked up his thoughts,
Light was a luminous torture in his heart,
Light coursed, a splendid agony, through his nerves;
His darkness muttered perishing in her blaze.
Her mastering Word commanded every limb
And left no room for his enormous will...
He called to Night but she fell shuddering back,
He called to Hell but sullenly it retired:
He turned to the Inconscient for support,
From which he was born, his vast sustaining self:

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 745, 747.

It drew him back towards boundless vacancy
 As if by himself to swallow up himself;
 He called to his strength, but it refused his call.
 His body was eaten by light, his spirit devoured.
 At last he knew defeat inevitable...
 Afar he fled...

The dire universal Shadow disappeared
 Vanishing into the Void from which it came.⁵⁷

His last defiance has been but a show of desperation, he is baffled, he loses his dark armour, the soul's Light eats up the outer body of Death, and the prophecy foretold is now fulfilled at last:

Even there shall come as a high crown of all
 The end of Death, the death of Ignorance.

Eternal Night and Double Twilight have thus both been beyonded, but Savitri has yet to cross some more hurdles in the field of Everlasting Day before she can return to earth with Satyavan. First the Power, who had died in the flames of Savitri's blaze of *visva-rupa*, reappears phoenix-like as a Lord of Light:

Transfigured was the formidable shape...

Night the dim mask had grown a wonderful face.⁵⁸

He changes his tactics, and now offers the ultimate bliss in heaven to Savitri. But she will not be tempted:

I climb not to thy everlasting Day,
 Even as I have shunned thy eternal Night...
 Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls;
 Earth is the heroic spirit's battlefield...
 In vain thou temptst with solitary bliss
 Two spirits saved out of a suffering world;
 My soul and his indissolubly linked
 In the one task for which our lives were born

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 748-9. ⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 762.

To raise the world to God in deathless Light,
 To bring God down to the world on earth we came,
 To change the earthly life to life divine.⁵⁹

The God has no option but to submit to Savitri's adamant resolution:

As I have taken from thee my load of night
 And taken from thee my twilight's doubts and dreams,
 So now I take my light of utter Day.⁶⁰

He withdraws into his triple symbol-worlds, and Savitri presently grows aware of the primordial invisible Mother-Spirit, who poses four times the choice between the four-fold beatitudes of Peace, Oneness, Power, Joy and the infinite uncertainties of life upon earth. But Savitri is still a rock of adamant; she is only for "earth and men", and she must share the heavenly felicities with men on earth. Then breaks forth from the Silence the blissful sanction and decree:

O beautiful body of the incarnate Word,
 Thy thoughts are mine, I have spoken with thy voice...
 All thou hast asked I give to earth and men...
 O Sun-Word, thou shalt raise the earth-soul to Light
 And bring down God into the lives of men...
 When all thy work in human time is done,
 The mind of earth shall be a home of light,
 The life of earth a tree growing towards heaven,
 The body of earth a tabernacle of God.⁶¹

Benediction is doubled with prophecy, and as Savitri and Satyavan re-awaken on the bosom of the earth they are surprised with joy and they are deeply content, and "over wide earth brooded the infinite bliss". The last Book ('Epilogue') describes their return to Dyumatsena's

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 770, 777. ⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 779.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 783-5.

place — a Dyumatsena restored to his sight and throne — and they retire for the night full of expectancy of “a greater dawn”.

V

Savitri, a poem like no other, is based on vision and experience that do not come in everybody's way, and is sustained by an aesthesis that is geared to the quality of this vision and the nature of this experience. Large tracts of the poem raise difficulties for the ‘common reader’ as much by the unfamiliarity of the subject-matter as by the knotted pregnancy of the poetic utterance. Sri Aurobindo himself has admitted that the poem deals with “so many various heights and degrees and so much varying substance of thought and feeling and descriptive matter and narrative”,⁶² and any attempt to apply stereotyped criteria of evaluation must prove infructuous. Nor can we expect a uniform level of articulation in a poem of nearly 24,000 lines. Also, exercises in commentary or elucidation would be in vain, unless the critic too has had the same range of mystic experience, or is at least conditioned by his psychic and intellectual training to enter into the spirit of such experience. In this predicament it is hardly surprising that Sri Aurobindo should be his own best annotator and interpreter, as may be seen from his numerous letters on *Savitri*, many of which are now appended to the one-volume edition of the poem. Writing of the essential character of the poem, Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1947:

Savitri is the record of a seeing, of an experience

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 864.

which is not of the common kind and is often very far from what the general human mind sees and experiences.... There must be a new extension of consciousness and aesthesis to appreciate a new kind of mystic poetry.⁶³

For example, when objection was taken to Sri Aurobindo's impressionistic description of the earth —

Athwart the vain enormous trance of Space,
Its formless stupor without mind or life,
A shadow spinning through a soulless Void,
Thrown back once more into unthinking dreams,
Earth wheeled abandoned in the hollow gulfs....⁶⁴ —

because, after all, only half the earth is dark at any time, Sri Aurobindo answered:

I am not writing a scientific treatise, I am selecting certain ideas and impressions to form a symbol of a partial temporary darkness of the soul and Nature which seems to a temporary feeling of that which is caught in the Night as if it were universal and eternal. One who is lost in that Night does not think of the outer half of the earth as full of light; to him all is Night and the earth is a forsaken wanderer in an enduring darkness. If I sacrifice this impressionism and abandon the image of the earth wheeling through dark space I might as well abandon the symbol altogether....⁶⁵

Again, the criticism of the expression "teased the Incon-

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 910. ⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 829. In terms of Copernican astronomy, of course, 'dawn' is not really the "rise" of the Sun; it is only the earth getting into a position when the Sun can illuminate the exposed part. The earth continues to revolve, and the exposed hemisphere changes too; the Gods are, after all, always awake. And all 'dawn' is self-unfolding, all knowledge is self-discovery!

scient to wake Ignorance", called forth these comments:

Inconscient and Ignorance... to me they are realities, concrete powers whose resistance is present everywhere and at all times in its tremendous and boundless mass...

Men have not learnt yet to recognise the Inconscient on which the whole material world they see is built, or the Ignorance of which their whole nature including their knowledge is built...

The mystical poet can only describe what he has felt, seen in himself or others or in the world just as he has felt or seen it or experienced through exact vision, close contact or identity and leave it to the general reader to understand or not understand or misunderstand according to his capacity....⁶⁶

When a later passage in the same Canto —

All grew a consecration and a rite.

Air was a vibrant link between earth and heaven:

The wide-winged hymn of a great priestly wind

Arose and failed upon the altar hills;

The high boughs prayed in a revealing sky —

was adversely commented upon by a critic, Sri Aurobindo remarked almost disarmingly:

I was not seeking for originality but for truth and the effective poetical expression of my vision. He finds no vision there, and that may be because I could not express myself with any power: but it may also be because of his temperamental failure to feel and see what I felt and saw.... The picture is that of a conscious adoration offered by Nature and in that each element is conscious in its own way, the wind and its hymn, the hills, the trees....

⁶⁶ *Savitri*, pp. 830-1, 856, 833.

This last line ("The high boughs...") is an expression of an experience which I often had whether in the mountains or on the plains of Gujarat or looking from my window in Pondicherry... and I am unable to find any feebleness either in the experience or in the words that express it.⁶⁷

One reason why parts of *Savitri*, especially those that try to project spiritual experiences, cause **puzzlement** to the average reader, why lines and sometimes whole passages strike him as "unpoetic" or not particularly poetic, is the nature of the "Overhead" aesthesis, its tantalising knot of power and limitation. Even sadhaks of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga or committed Aurobindonians, unless happily endowed, have experienced this difficulty, and hence Sri Aurobindo has been at pains to explain what they should look for in *Savitri*. Poetry no doubt is concerned with beauty, and aesthetics — when it does not degenerate into aestheticism of the "Art for Art's sake" variety — looks for the *rasa* or taste of beauty. But poetry should be for Truth's sake too, not only for Beauty's sake, though of course — at the highest level of apprehension — the two may be indistinguishable. Sri Aurobindo adds:

Aesthetics belongs to the mental range and all that depends upon it.... The Overmind is essentially a spiritual power. Mind in it surpasses its ordinary self and rises and takes its stand on a spiritual foundation. It embraces beauty and sublimates it; it has an essential aesthesis which is not limited by rules and canons; it sees a universal and eternal beauty while it takes up and transforms all that is limited and particular.... Overmind in all its deal-

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 901-2, 903-4, 909.

ings puts truth first; it brings out the essential truth (and truths) in things and also its infinite possibilities; it brings out even the truth that lies behind falsehood and error....⁶⁸

Poetic appreciation cannot be mechanically cultivated; and some kinds of poetry are bound to prove caviare to the general. To be able to appreciate *Savitri*, one has to be "open to this kind of poetry, able to see the spiritual vision it conveys, capable too of feeling the Overhead touch when it comes".⁶⁹ The Overmind — or any 'overhead' (which comprises all the above-mind states of consciousness: Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind, Mind of Light) — touch must involve, in some measure at least, a "cosmic consciousness", a background consciousness to which the million particulars of phenomenal life perceived by the mind or the vital emotion or the physical seeing are ultimately related: "In the direct Overmind transmission this something behind is usually forced to the front, or close to the front".⁷⁰ But, then, as with Arnold's 'Grand Style' or the Longinian 'Sublime', the Overhead touch or note too "has to be felt and cannot be explained or accounted for".⁷¹

Sri Aurobindo is, however, careful to add that "Overhead poetry is not necessarily greater or more perfect than any other kind of poetry". And yet, although perfection is perfection — whether it be perfection of the language, or of the word-music and rhythm, or of the feeling or thought communicated — "there is also the quality of the thing said which counts for something".⁷² A pebble has its beauty, and snow-clad Himalayas are

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 842.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 864.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 823.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 920.

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 936.

beautiful too bordering on the mystical sublime. How do we "grade" perfection and greatness in poetry? Sri Aurobindo ventures to formulate some criteria, giving importance to the inrush of the higher or Overhead consciousness that heightens or greatens what it touches and illumines. But how about a poet's greatest possible effort? —

...sometimes a felicitous turn or an unusual force of language or a deeper note of feeling brings in the Overhead touch. More often it is the power of the rhythm that lifts up language that is simple and common or a feeling or idea that has often been expressed and awakes something which is not ordinarily there.... But sometimes there comes down a supreme voice, the Overmind voice and the Overmind music.... But its greatest work will be to express adequately and constantly what is now only occasionally and inadequately some kind of utterance of the things above, the things beyond, the things behind the apparent world and its external and superficial happenings and phenomena. It would not only bring in the occult in its larger and deeper ranges but the truths of the spiritual heights, the spiritual depths, the spiritual intimacies and vastnesses as also the truths of the inner mind, the inner life, an inner or subtle physical beauty and reality.... It might even enter into the domain of the infinite and inexhaustible, catch some word of the Ineffable, show us revealing images which bring us near to the Reality that is secret in us and in all....⁷³

There is no infallible Geiger counter to detect perfect perfection that is also supreme utterance. Recognition

⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 937-40.

could come as in a blinding lightning flash: or it could steal over and fill the consciousness like rare unforgettable perfume: or course through the bloodstreams causing a sudden splendid exhilaration and ecstasy. All over *Savitri* are scattered lines that seem to be charged with this drive of power and grace of Grace:

A fathomless zero occupied the world...

Dawn built her aura of magnificent hues
And buried its seed of grandeur in the hours...

A body like a parable of dawn
That seemed a niche for veiled divinity...

He found the occult cave, the mystic door
Near to the well of vision in the soul,
And entered where the Wings of Glory brood...

A nebula of the splendours of the gods
Made from the musings of eternity....⁷⁴

Sometimes a cosmic simile or the evocation of a deathless moment of the mythic past (which is also the living eternal present) — many lines in sequence or a whole passage — may cumulatively carry the sovereign Overmind ambience. Thus of Aswapathy:

As shines a solitary witness star
That burns apart, Light's lonely sentinel,
In the drift and teeming of a mindless Night,
A single thinker in an aimless world
Awaiting some tremendous dawn of God,
He saw the purpose in the works of Time....⁷⁵

Thus of Savitri, as seen by Narad:

Who is this that comes, the bride,
The flame-born, and round her illumined head

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 3, 6, 18, 84, 135. ⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.155.

Pouring their lights her hymeneal pomps
 Move flashing about her? From what green glimmer of
 glades

Retreating into dewy silences
 Or half-seen-verge of waters moon-betrayed
 Bringst thou this glory of enchanted eyes?⁷⁶

And thus of the tremendous event of Christ's incarnation and crucifixion:

The Son of God born as the Son of man
 Has drunk the bitter cup, owned Godhead's debt....
 Now is the debt paid, wiped off the original score.
 The Eternal suffers in a human form,
 He has signed salvation's testament with his blood:
 He has opened the doors of his undying peace.
 The Deity compensates the creature's claim,
 The Creator bears the law of pain and death;
 A retribution smites the incarnate God.⁷⁷

In this cosmic epic that aims at projecting "a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other", Sri Aurobindo has used language with unlimited freedom, not admitting "any mental rule of what is or is not poetic".⁷⁸ Fidelity to the vision and experience has been the only governing consideration. There are clarities of vision and varieties of experience — covering the whole arc from the Inconscient to the Superconscient — not all of which are within the average reader's range of comprehension. Where our vision or experience coincides with the poet's, recognition is immediate, as with the description of our own sordid and sullied world of follies, falsities, fatuities and futilities — an evil house of many mansions:

It was a no-man's land of evil air,

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 475. ⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 504. ⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 835.

A crowded neighbourhood without one home,
 A borderland between the world and hell....
 The Fiend was visible, but cloaked in light;
 He seemed a helping angel from the skies:
 He armed untruth with Scripture and the Law;
 He deceived with wisdom, with virtue slew the soul
 And led to perdition by the heavenward path....⁷⁹

This might be the description of a Ministry of Truth in Big Brother's Government Somewhere (that's almost Everywhere). Again, these images of the modern city, poised on perilous uncertainty and anxiety, and enacting unending lechery, greed and hate:

A capital was there without a State:
 It had no ruler, only groups that strove.
 He saw a city of ancient Ignorance
 Founded upon a soil that knew not Light.
 There each in his own darkness walked alone...⁸⁰

Around him crowded grey and squalid huts
 Neighbouring proud palaces of perverted Power,
 Inhuman quarters and demoniac wards....
 A glut of hideous forms and hideous deeds
 Paralysed pity in the hardened breast.
 In booths of sin night-repairs of vice
 Styled infamies of the body's concupiscence
 And sordid imaginations etched in flesh,
 Turned lust into a decorative art...⁸¹

A barriered autarchy excluded light....
 Flaunting its cross of servitude like a crown,
 It clung to its dismal harsh autonomy.
 A bull-throat bellowed with its brazen tongue;...
 A deafened acquiescence gave its vote,

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 234-5. ⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 236. ⁸¹ *ibid.*, pp. 240-1.

And braggart dogmas shouted in the night
 Kept for the fallen soul once deemed a god
 The pride of its abysmal absolute.⁸²

On the other hand, there are also harmonies and intensities and fulfilments not less real than the discords and frivolities and falsities; yet these are not within our everyday range of experience. And when Sri Aurobindo — because *he* has visioned them and experienced them as clearly and as vividly as we experience the sights and movements on our earthly inferno — when Sri Aurobindo describes these higher and purer altitudes, we are merely dazed, as in a dream or by a fantasy. It is not something, we feel, that touches us in the raw. Words, words, words, we say; mysticism, perhaps, but not something to hold on to — like a bed-post! Accustomed to the dark, light itself becomes an intruding impertinence. Attuned to falsehood's syllogisms, Truth's axioms sound like unrealities. At best there is but a willing suspension of disbelief:

All there was soul or made of sheer soul-stuff:
 A sky of soul covered a deep soul-ground.
 All here was known by a spiritual sense...
 Body was not there, for bodies were needed not,
 The soul itself was its own deathless form
 And met at once the touch of other souls
 Close, blissful, concrete, wonderfully true...
 He met and communed without bar of speech
 With beings unveiled by a material frame.
 There was a strange spiritual scenery,
 A loveliness of lakes and streams and hills,
 A flow, a fixity in a soul-space,
 And plains and valleys, stretches of soul-joy,

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 245.

And gardens that were flower-tracts of the spirit,
Its meditations of tinged reverie.⁸³

Aswapathy (or Sri Aurobindo) has seen something, it is as living a thing to him as is the table on which I write, it becomes as much a part of his treasured experience as a city we have lived in, a memorable face in a crowd that we had once seen, or a deathless moment — whether of joy or pain — in our otherwise humdrum lives. All the same, Sri Aurobindo's words may leave *us* cold because we haven't seen what he had seen, we haven't the beatific certitudes that had come to him as the crown of his Yoga. If we had a feeling for words but no sympathy — or aptitude — for arduous climbs of Yoga, we might find in the descriptions some power of observation, some word-embroidery, some colouring of the imagination, but no more. But unless the reader at least concedes the reality of spiritual values — unless the reader has felt a psychic opening to the intuitions of the spirit — large areas of *Savitri* must remain opaque, or without positive relevance, to him; and the poem as a whole, too, will fail to make the intended total effect. Certainly, any reader almost can get something — something of profound significance — out of *Savitri* or some sections of the poem. But for it to yield all its secrets and to effect the cathartic alchemic change in our consciousness, *Savitri* should be approached, not alone as great poetry, but equally as a means of Yoga sadhana — as a body of *mantra* to be read and pondered and translated into realisation.

⁸³ *ibid*, pp. 330-1.

VI

In a long spiritual epic like *Savitri*, in which the subjective element is more dominant than the merely narrative, in which psychological states and occult realities take far more space than descriptions of physical actualities, it is inevitable that the poet should put more of himself into the poem than in the traditional heroic epic. Commenting on the animadversions of a critic, Sri Aurobindo wrote in 1947:

...the poet writes for his own satisfaction, his own delight in poetical creation or to express himself, and he leaves his work for the world, and rather for posterity than for the contemporary world, to recognise or to ignore, to judge and value according to its perception or its pleasure...⁸⁴

But a great poet, although he may write for his own satisfaction, writes also for the future. He is not just recording something that is past and done with, but is presenting the permanent essence of his experience, and this only gains in significance with the passage of time. The completion of a poem or its first publication marks no more than the beginning of its unpredictable life. Dante's *Commedia*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Milton's epic, Goethe's *Faust*, not to mention works like the *Gita*: have we yet come to the end of our 'understanding' of these constituents of the human heritage? This applies even more, perhaps, to a cosmic epic like *Savitri*, which Sri Aurobindo himself once described as "an experiment in mystic poetry, spiritual poetry cast into a symbolic figure".⁸⁵

Attentive readers of *Savitri* who were reasonably fa-

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 896. ⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 852.

miliar with the principal landmarks of Sri Aurobindo's life could no doubt see that the poem was in some measure — perhaps in substantial measure — his own spiritual autobiography. In an epic pronouncedly psychological, the poet must necessarily draw upon the reserves of his inner life. Aswapathy's Yoga takes up 22 Cantos or about 370 pages (out of a total of 814). There is the Yoga of the King (itself divided into three stages), there is the exhaustive exploration of the occult world-stair, there is the adoration of the Divine Mother, and there is the boon of her promised incarnation in a human form. According to the *Mahabharata* story, the childless King, Aswapathy, did tapasya for eighteen years till the Goddess Savitri appeared and promised a daughter to him. It is on this that Sri Aurobindo has built the whole many-chambered edifice of Aswapathy's Yoga, very largely drawing upon his own experiences and realisations at Baroda, Alipur, Chandernagore and Pondicherry. The scientist with a microscope in a laboratory, the astronomer with a telescope in an observatory, these specially equipped men are able to see the infinitely small or the infinitely distant: the particles, the constellations, the speeds, the orbits are photographed or calculated, and these photographs and calculations are ready for our scrutiny. Don't we believe them? The secrets of the occult world are likewise revealed to us by Sri Aurobindo, for with his special gift of double vision or universal sight he had seen them and been them, and he has brought us news from the Invisible — from zero and from infinity! The identification of Aswapathy's Yoga with Sri Aurobindo's should not, however, mean equating Aswapathy's with Sri Aurobindo's life at all points or in every particular.

There is, then, Savitri and her Yoga. In the *Mahabharata*, when the first year of wedded life is about to draw to a close, Savitri undertakes a three nights' (*tri-ratra*) vow, fasting, praying and keeping vigil throughout. This is transformed in Sri Aurobindo's poem into Savitri's Yoga — her journey into the "inner countries", her search for her soul, and her coalescence of herself with the Infinite. To readers of these Cantos, it seemed a plausible identification to see Savitri's Yoga as the Mother's own. Again, it would be wrong to make the Savitri-Mirra parallel go all the way. It is also necessary to remember that, although Aswapathy's is superficially an exteriorised Yoga and Savitri's an interiorised Yoga, the spiritual realities affirmed or experienced by them are the same. The individual, universal and transcendent realisations are common features, but there is no repetition; there is seeming variation and there is also oneness behind the play of variation. Quintessentially it is the same consciousness, although it may seem to divide itself into two: the two complementary halves of the one cosmic or supramental consciousness. Aswapathy is the Forerunner, Savitri is the avatar; and they are both necessary for the manifestation, and the dual act of redemption and new creation.

With repeated re-readings of *Savitri* and a greater intimacy with Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings, these early surmises seemed to gain only further corroboration. Presently Huta — an aspirant who had felt the call of the Mother from Miwani in far-off Africa — came to the Ashram at Pondicherry, and the Mother and Huta began a truly unique tapasya of collaboration: rendering *Savitri* in painting. As the Mother later wrote:

Savitri, this prophetic vision of the world's history,

including the announcement of the earth's future. — Who can ever dare to put it in pictures?

Yet the Mother and Huta have tried it, this way.

We simply meditate together on the lines chosen, and when the image becomes clear, I describe it with the help of a few strokes, then Huta goes to her studio and brushes the painting.

It is in a meditative mood that these 'meditations' must be looked at to find the feeling they contain behind their appearance.⁸⁶

A selection of twenty-three of these paintings, illustrating Canto 1, appeared as a superb publication, *Meditations on Savitri*, on 15 August 1962; the second volume with thirty-five paintings on Cantos 2 and 3, came out in 1963; the third volume with forty-nine paintings, in 1965; and the fourth with twenty on Canto 5, in 1966 — in all 127 plates illustrating Book One. On 10 February 1967, an Exhibition of 460 paintings was held in Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, with the Mother's brief announcement: HERE IS SAVITRI. And Huta's succinct comment was: "All can be done if the God-touch is there".

There is always a slight difference in emphasis between the poetic treatment of a theme and a painter's (or sculptor's) interpretation of the same theme. In *Meditations on Savitri* — the very title 'Meditations' hints at *sādhana* — we have the Mother's interpretations of some of the life-lines, or seminal passages, in the earlier Cantos of *Savitri*. The 'interpretations' are not at the intellectual but at a high Overhead level; it is vision and experience again as stimulated by Sri Aurobindo's poem, and rendered in line and colour by the Mother and

⁸⁶ *Meditations on Savitri*, prefatory statement.

Huta. Readers who had encountered a wall of resistance between themselves and the poem now saw, or thought they saw, the images, the symbol-actions, the occult-situations. The paintings were not "realistic", they subscribed to no "school", — perhaps they only signified the emergence of an Overhead School. And what they achieved was to bring out the inner reality behind the material façade by giving arresting form, movement, colour, life and mind — shall we call it the "Mind of Light"? — to psychological, occult and spiritual phenomena. The Mother herself has said, introducing the fourth volume of *Meditations on Savitri*: "Behind the appearances there is a subtle reality much closer to Truth; it is that one we are trying to show you". And yet, how is one to bring out the contours of the Divine? Leonardo da Vinci found it no easy matter to paint the figure of Christ in 'The Last Supper', the problem being to charge a human face with the aura of the Divine. How, then, does a painter translate into line and colour apocalyptic visions or psychic realities like these:

Then something in the inscrutable darkness stirred...

An eye of deity pierced through the dumb depths...

A great nude arm of splendour sudden rose;

It rent the gauge opaque of Nescience...

Along a path of aeons serpentine

In the coiled blackness of her nescient course

The Earth-Goddess toils across the sands of Time...

A sailor on the Inconscient's fathomless sea,

He voyages through a starry world of thought

On Matter's deck to a spiritual sun...

The *mantra* knocks at the inner door, and there is a

call, and some projection on the film of consciousness. Huta's paintings corroborate the intuitions and quicken the vibrations, but all must be re-enacted in the reader's meditative poise of stillness and spiritual apprehension. It is *sadhanā* — or nothing. And how does one visualise Life and Death? Huta's illustration of "Death slays the journeying discoverer, Life" is the attempted answer. And of course there are the superlative challenges to the painter: how should she figure out Aswapathy, and how Savitri? In Book I, Canto 5, a climactic point is reached in the Yoga of the King when he achieves cosmic consciousness:

A universal light was in his eyes.

A golden influx flowed through heart and brain...

This is a challenge to the painter's art, and the challenge is squarely met and mastered: "all can be done if the God-touch is there". Aswapathy as the Mother sees him — as Huta paints him — is visible Sri Aurobindo, but still it is no photograph, no laborious portrait, but rather the soul of that "living centre of the Illimitable" recreated and thrown on the sensitive film of the psychic self. And even as Sri Aurobindo visualised Savitri in her avatar role in the image of the Mother herself, for Huta too — when she meditates with the Mother and when she tries to realise in colour the Mother's suggestions and interpretations — Savitri is verily reincarnated as the Mother: again, no mere mimicry of the visible physical form, but rather realisation after realisation of the kaleidoscopic inscapes of the infinitudes of the Mother's soul:

And Savitri too woke among these tribes...

Her passion-flower of love and doom she gave...

Of her pangs she made a mystic poignant sword...
All came back to her: Earth and Love and Doom...
A priestess of immaculate ecstasies...
To wrestle with the Shadow she had come...
Immaculate in herself, she gathered force.
This was the day when Satyavan must die.

Everywhere it is the same Savitri: Vyasa's, Sri Aurobindo's, the Mother's, Huta's — the wonder-wife Savitri, the incarnate Divine Mother, the visibly living Mother, the Mother infallibly evoked in line and colour and symbolic suggestion. And in the illustrations to Cantos 3, 4 and 5, Aswapathy too appears again and again, the word-power of the poet now translated into ikon in colour, and as we turn page after page — plate after plate — Aswapathy is seen to grow dimension on dimension, till he is poised to plan the remaking of man and his world:

His was a spirit that stooped from larger spheres
Into our province of ephemeral sight,
A colonist from immortality...

The landmarks of the little person fell,
The island ego joined the continent...

He sat in secret chambers looking out
Into the luminous countries of the unborn...

He stood upon a threshold serpent-watched,
And peered into gleaming endless-corridors...

Always the power poured back like sudden rain,
Or slowly in his breast a presence grew...

Already in him was seen that task of Power:
Life made its home on the high tops of self;

His soul, mind, heart became a single sun;
Only life's lower reaches remained dim...
Even on the struggling Nature left below
Strong periods of illumination came...
Splendours of insight filled the blank of thought...

Thus came his soul's release from Ignorance...
The universal strengths were linked with his;
Filling earth's smallness with their boundless breadths,
He drew the energies that transmute an age.

The fittings, the electric bulb, the lampshade are necessary things; but if the switch itself fails to click, there is no light, no illumination of the open page, no leap of understanding for the mind or soul. Likewise, the ikon — be it verbal or a projection in colour or form — can leap to significance only if the soul within clicks to attention and re-enacts the *divina commedia* of the death of Death and the return to absolute sovereignty of the Soul that is Truth as well as Love.

Later still, on 18 January 1968, the Mother commenced another *sādhana*: reading out key passages, meditating for a while, then making explanatory comments which were tape-recorded. Her words on the opening Canto have now been published as *About Savitri* (1972), with some more of Hura's paintings. The Mother describes *Savitri* as verily "the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision"; and hence to read the poem, as it were in a trance of meditation, must involve an attempt to re-capture the vision and re-enact in the Mind of Light awakened out of the Mind of Night that "supreme revelation". The Mother's comment on the very first line lightningly projects the sublime spiritual perspectives of the poem. The first emanations from the Supreme

Mother — Consciousness, Bliss, Truth, Life — lose contact with their Origin on account of their immersion in the Darkness, and in consequence dwindle into Unconsciousness, Suffering, Falsehood, Death. To redeem these four perverted and lost emanations, the Supreme Mother sends out a new series of emanations, the Gods. The exordium thus describes in the cosmic context the interval between the first and the second series of Divine emanations, — “the hour before the Gods awake”.

From the Divine Summits, the descent to the Nadir of Inconscience: but in the Earth — albeit apparently an abandoned mass of Inconscience — the Divine is actually veiled, secreted, benumbed, asleep, petrified, yet also awaiting the reverse movement of Evolution or return to Consciousness. Something stirs at last in the “inscrutable darkness”, it is a new beginning of beginnings; “it is the starting-point, the first movement in evolution — the evolution that is the turning back of the Inconscient to return to the full Consciousness”. Millions of years pass, then with the eruption of Mind in Man, there is an insistent sense of time, a feverish quickening of the pace. On the other hand, it is the “God-touch” alone that determines everything: the coming of avatar after avatar, the emergence of newer and newer cones of light, the growth of wider and wider wings of consciousness. The story of the Earth, the stir of awakening life, the repeated coming and rejection of the Ray, the surge and sweep of the evolutionary adventure, the culminating definitive divine-action of Savitri — all somehow mix and mingle and merge marvellously in the impressionistic Revelation of ‘The Symbol Dawn’.

“It is a symbolic work”, says the Mother, “not the telling of a story of something that happened; it is the

illustration in a condensed and imaged form of this effort of the Divine to divinise the material creation". And she adds, underlining the deeper implications of the Legend and the Symbol:

It is this terrible story of the creation of earth and man as the means to save the world from suffering and destruction.

The death of Satyavan becomes the symbol of the misery of the earth's creation, of its fate and, through Savitri, of its liberation. She faces the doom in order to give the solution.

The creation is plunged in misery, suffering and death. But it can and *will* be saved through Her intervention.

An ambrosial assurance, this: "*will* be saved"! Poetry, meditation, exegesis: these are movements of the same Consciousness, efflorescence of the same Revelation. The Divine Zenith, the Inconscient Nadir, the whole realm between: the way down, the way up, the whole stairway: the linking up of the extremities, the One Consciousness dividing only to unite again: the mystery and miracle of Creation, the Fall, the Ascension — all, all are suggested, all are invoked, all are shown in action in this unique and wonderful poem.

VII

During the two decades between the publication of the opening Canto of *Savitri* (August 1946) and the Exhibition of Huta's 460 "meditations" (February 1967), not only had the enormous epic been published in full, first in two volumes and then in a single volume (along with

the letters), it had also provoked intelligent and increasing interest in India and abroad. A doctoral dissertation on *Savitri*, of which he was one of the referees, led Professor H. O. White of Trinity College, Dublin, to make a deep study of the poem itself, and he was profoundly enough affected to call it "a truly remarkable poem", and add:

I was immensely impressed by the extraordinary combination of East and West in the poem, of ancient Indian lore with the thought and experience of the modern cosmopolitan world.⁸⁷

Again:

The poem has impressed me by its sublimity, richness of imagery, and lofty spiritual level, allied with great skill in interpreting unusual psychic experiences through appropriate imagery.

Another of the referees, Professor Vivian de Sola Pinto of the University of Nottingham, described *Savitri* in the *Modern Language Review* (July 1963) as a "remarkable epic... surely among the greatest poetic achievements of the present century".

In the meantime, A. B. Purani's valuable commentary — *Savitri: An Approach and a Study* — had appeared and gone into a second edition (1956), and during his visits to England, Africa and the United States, he often discoursed eloquently on the poem and succeeded in bringing about a diffusion of interest in Sri Aurobindo and his work. His literary contacts too were valuable, and Sir Herbert Read wrote to him, after reading *Ilion*:

It is a remarkable achievement by any standard, and I am full of amazement that some one not of

⁸⁷ Letter dated 21 July 1960 to Prema Nandakumar, whose thesis has since been published as *A Study of 'Savitri'* (1962).

English origin should have such a wonderful command, not only over language as such, but of its skilful elaboration into poetic diction of such high quality.

In India, although some of the younger poets could not or would not see anything in *Savitri*, the epic nevertheless found more and more readers, and scholars like Nolini Kanta Gupta, K. D. Sethna, V. K. Gokak, Prema Nandakumar, M. P. Pandit, Rameshwar Gupta, Sisirkumar Ghose and Ravindra Khanna — steadily extended the frontiers of *Savitri* studies, and many a leading poet in the regional languages has gratefully acknowledged his debt of inspiration to the creator of *Savitri*. Translations of parts of *Savitri* also appeared, including a Sanskrit rendering of the first Canto by T. V. Kapali Sastry. Huta's paintings thus only raised such dedicated attention to a new level of meditative absorption. By now all but the wilfully or congenitally blind could see that *Savitri* was truly an indubitable world classic, an epic with a cosmic range and a prophetic appeal, "a happy compensation" for the sick hurry and feverish aims of our diseased times.

Savitri has been read as poetry, as poetised philosophy, as symbolistic and mystic poetry, as an example of the Overhead inspiration at work over prolonged jets of utterance, and as an experiment in blank verse that avoids the Miltonic polyphonic paragraphs and returns to the clarities of Tennyson and the pre-Shakespearean Marlowe, and more particularly the Kalidasian and Upanishadic fusion of finish and power. Even people with no academic background — perhaps they far more than the mere academics — have felt drawn to *Savitri*, reading and re-reading and memorising and reciting, although not fully — not always — understanding every-

thing. Some are content with opening *Savitri* somewhere at random, reading a few lines, and trying to withdraw into an inner world. Doesn't Aswapathy himself move from experience to doctrine, and from 'The Secret Knowledge' to still profounder experience? In this favourable climate of *Savitri* studies, Huta's paintings — the result of joint meditations by the Mother and Huta on particular passages or self-sufficing *mantric* utterances — have underlined the supreme importance of *Savitri* for *sādhana*. The Mother herself had participated in these "meditations"! — that surely was vastly significant. When a sadhak at last asked the Mother for guidance some nine months after the Exhibition of the *Savitri* paintings, she took the opportunity to make some revelations — and what marvellous revelations! — that at once threw a new light both on the composition of the poem and on its singular efficacy for *sādhana*. The words were spoken, as by a mother to a child, with love, with intimacy, with authority. It is not the tone of the academic critic, nor of the sophisticated lecturer, nor of the supercilious seminar-participant; there is here no argument, no attempt at exegesis; there is only simple statement and a call for reliance on the inner guide. First about the 'matter' of *Savitri*, and of its *mantric* mode of communication:

He (Sri Aurobindo) has crammed the whole universe into a single book. It is a marvellous work, magnificent, and of an incomparable perfection....

My child, yes, everything is there, mysticism, occultism, philosophy, the history of evolution, the history of man, of the gods, of creation, of nature — why, for what purpose, what destiny? All is there....

Each verse of *Savitri* is like a revealed *mantra*... the rhythm leads you to the origin of sound which is OM.... It gives out vibrations for him who can receive them, the true vibrations of each stage of consciousness.

About *Savitri* as Sri Aurobindo's (and her own) spiritual autobiography, the Mother was equally explicit:

These are experiences lived by him, — realities, cosmic truths. He experienced all this, as one experiences joys or sorrows physically. He walked in the darkness of inconscience, even in the neighbourhood of death, endured the sufferings of perdition and emerged from the mud, the earth's misery, to breathe the sovereign plenitude and enter the supreme Ananda....

He accepted suffering to transform suffering with the joy of union with the Supreme....

All this is his (Sri Aurobindo's) own experience, and what is most surprising is that it is my own experience also.... And I observed something curious, that day after day the experiences he read out to me in the morning were those I had had the previous night. Word for word, yes all the descriptions, the colours, the pictures I had seen, the words I had heard, all, all I had heard put by him into poetry, into miraculous poetry.... And it was not just one day, but for days together.... It is the picture of our joint adventure into the Unknown, or rather into the Supermind....

And, finally, about the way *Savitri* should be read, and about what one might hope for through the *sādhana* of such reading:

Savitri is the whole Yoga of transformation, and

this Yoga now comes for the first time in the earth consciousness....

Whoever is willing to practise Yoga, tries sincerely, and finds the necessity for it, will be able to climb with the help of *Savitri* to the highest step of the ladder of Yoga, will be able to find the secret that *Savitri* represents....

But you must not read it as you read other books, or newspapers. You must read with an empty head, a blank and vacant mind, without there being any other thought, you must concentrate much, remain empty, calm and open: then the words, rhythms, vibrations will penetrate directly....

The direct method is by the heart... if you try to concentrate really with this aspiration, you can light a flame, the psychic flame, the flame of purification....

The great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, once said that the meaning and purpose of his *Malte Laurids Brigge* amounted to this:

this, how is it possible to live, when the very elements of this life are unintelligible to us? when we're everlastingly inadequate in love, uncertain in resolve, and incapable in the presence of death, how is it possible to exist?⁸⁸

But Rilke himself had no final answer to give in terms of poetic art.

The completely satisfying answer is *Savitri*, which makes intelligible man's life in the cosmos, shows Love as Power wedded to Grace, demonstrates the possibility of the death of Death, and projects man's future in a changed and transformed Earth.

⁸⁸ Quoted by J. B. Leishman, in his Introduction to Rilke's *Poems*, pp. 18-9.

Might we not, then, salute the author of *Savitri* — as the poets salute Virgil in Dante's poem — *Onorate l'altissimo poeta*: Honour the Poet of Highest Eminence, honour the Ultimate Poet!⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Cf. the American poet D.R. Cameron's tribute to *Savitri*:

...the mantra's bard
Sifters a way over almighty abysses
To epic a world behind the soul's paroxysms.
The words are stars shooting across a mind
More vast than galaxies of the blind
Who may touch one day after time's long famine
The rare and occult flesh of Savitri and Satyavan.

(*Mother India*, August 1966, p. 76.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

IDENTITY WITH GOD

I

On the eve of the fourth Darshan Day in 1938 (24 November), there was an accident as related in the previous chapter and Sri Aurobindo's right leg sustained an injury and had to be put in plaster. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, who had been staying with some of their disciples in the house in Rue de la Marine (now known as 'Library House') from October 1922, moved to an adjoining house in the same street on 8 February 1927. This was the seventh and last of the houses in Pondicherry which Sri Aurobindo was to occupy. Known as 'Meditation House', this and the 'Library House' (with subsequent alterations and additions) now form a big complex, and constitute the hub of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and the Mother continues to stay there. Till November 1938, Sri Aurobindo usually attended to his comforts himself, although the ever-faithful Champaklal was always at his Master's service. Sri Aurobindo would thus himself daily light up the mosquito coils at the four corners of his bed before retiring for the night. He worked till late at night, using the hand of his chair as his table for writing. The furniture and fittings of the room were austere in the early years — a cot, a straight table, an easy chair, a time-piece, a waste-paper basket, and the usual tea things, jugs, cups, saucers. After the accident of 1938, some necessary changes took place. Fans for driving away the inevitable flies: walking sticks: a special dining table.

There were vases, and roses too. On 15 September 1939, the Mother offered to Sri Aurobindo the flower "Gratitude". It was a simple self-sufficing gesture.

Of the kind of constant human-divine life Sri Aurobindo lived in those days, who can bear witness except the Mother — or such reverent observant beloved attendants like Champaklal and Nirod? For example, the Mother has recalled a singular incident on the night of the cyclone when the noise was terrific and the rain-blast shook doors and windows and water splashed into the rooms. When the Mother went to Sri Aurobindo's room to help him shut the windows and keep out the rain, on noiselessly opening the door she "found him sitting quietly at his desk, writing. There was such a solid peace in the room that nobody would have dreamed that a cyclone was raging outside. All the windows were wide open, not a drop of rain was coming inside".⁹ What was this except the silent victory of the Spirit over matter and energy? And yet Sri Aurobindo was hardly the conscious or calculating miraculist: rather was he content to don humanity in all things. But however human he may have wanted to be in his contacts with others, his innate divinity irresistibly struck them in the eye. Even so, while something could surely be seen, something more inferred, much still remained beyond mere human comprehension or speculation. Typical of the double response was Nirodbaran's, who was perhaps nearer and closer to the Master than many:

The tender expressions that dropped from his lips, the pointed flashes of his quick humour, the silent unassuming distinction of his manner and, above all, his vigilant and subtle protection guarding us against

⁹ Quoted in *Sri Aurobindo* by Navajata (1972), p. 92.

all adverse forces — all these had been our heritage, but could we ever reflect in our passing mirror even the slightest shadow of his wide universal action? His detached greatness, disinterested largeness, limitless compassion and sweetness, as if Shiva had come down to earth to deliver the world from its roots of ignorance — where shall we see such a parallel?

And here are some of Nirod's snaps of the Master whether in action or in repose:

Anyone who had seen Sri Aurobindo at close quarters could never forget this Divine Child with a body supple, radiant and pure. His half-bare body, when he used to sit before the table for writing, his shapely hands, his long delicate fingers, had nothing of the crude mortal flesh in them; they were suffused, as it were, with a white transparent light, *une blancheur éclatante*, that could like the X-ray make one see through and through. How often have I not seen this radiance, when he used to sit up writing, or when he would rest in his chair, or when he was lying on the bed as if on the lap of the Divine Mother, with unclad shoulders and chest, the hands held together behind the head, the lips smiling in a wakeful dream? Every part of the body presented the picture of a god in human guise...*

In November 1946, the overdue renovation of Sri Aurobindo's room took place. A new bed adjustable in various positions, whether for reclining and dictating, resting or sleeping, or for taking his meals. He had now a good work-table too, with a sofa-chair in front; also book-cases nearby. On the table were fountain-pens,

* *Sri Aurobindo: 'I am here, I am here'* (from *Mother India*, 19 May 1951).

blotter, paper-weight, paper-cutter and a night-lamp. Electric fans kept the flies away, and there were a few pieces of decoration also — a lion, some human figures, and parrots.

One agreeable development after the 1938 accident was the resumption of talks with the disciples that had been discontinued after 24 November 1926. These talks took place in the mornings as well as evenings. Along with some of the older sadhaks like Purani, some of the younger like Nirod too were of the company. The talks, as before, covered a wide range of topics, and Sri Aurobindo's interventions were anecdotal, serious, witty, humorous, expository, reminiscential by turns, but always unpredictable. In December 1939, for example, on two successive days, the discussion turned on Einstein and Gravitation, matter and energy, and on Time as the fourth dimension. Some months later, on 17 September 1940, the curvature of space as visualised by Einstein came up again in the course of the discussion. When on 15 January 1939 there was a reference to Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Sri Aurobindo confessed that he had not read the book, and on being given a summary of Spengler's conclusions, he conceded that there was "some truth in Spengler's idea of destiny, as also in his idea of cycles of human history".¹ Four days later, the talk was about Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* and *Eyeless in Gaza*. Or, as the random breeze blowed, the conversation might for a moment light upon Greek sculpture or modern German art or on the impressionists or on Roger Fry's views on Art. On 24 January 1939, when the discussion was on the susceptibility of some races to beauty, Sri Aurobindo went into

¹ A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, First Series, p. 111.

silence for a while, and then said:

I was thinking how some races have the sense of beauty in their very bones. Judging from what is left to us, it seems our people once had a keen sense of beauty.

The Japanese, although they had it once, were losing it "because of the general vulgarisation"; and as for Germany, "Hitler must have crushed all fine things out of existence — German music, philosophy, etc. How can anything develop where there is no freedom?"² On 12 May 1940, intervening in the discussion on modern art, Sri Aurobindo said:

What modern art is trying to do — at least what it began with — is to convey the vital sensation of the object; very often it happens to be the lower vital sensations. But it is the first effort to get behind the physical form".³

On a later occasion (14 January 1941), Sri Aurobindo made a critical reference to the work of Cezanne and Matisse:

In their 'nude' studies it is a very low sexuality which they bring out. They call it 'Life'! One can hardly agree. Even in the ugliest corner of life there is something fine and even beautiful that saves it. Or the talk might turn on poets and poetry. Once he said that, although Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* was an earlier work and the more brilliant, *Kumarasambhava* was more deep and mature. Or the conversation skirted casually around Laurence Binyon, Stephen Phillips, Robert Bridges, Oscar Wilde, Manmohan Ghose, Bharati Sarabhai, the Hexameter, and the clue to it that a Cambridge friend, Ferrar, gave. Was Blake greater than Shakespeare? After

² *ibid.*, p. 304. ³ *ibid.*, p. 270.

Milton, what was the scope for the epic as a literary form? Of Hopkins, Sri Aurobindo said that he "becomes a great poet in his sonnets. He is not a mystic poet, but a religious one".⁴ Talking of T. S. Eliot, Sri Aurobindo said that he is "undoubtedly a poet", but added: "Why the devil does he go in for 'modernism' when he can write such fine stuff as *La Figlia che Piange*?"⁵ Again, on Nirod once remarking that some people criticised Nishikanto's poetry for its lack of refinement, Sri Aurobindo asked: "Since when has Bengal become so Puritan?", and added:

Moni said that he was not allowed to sing in school by the teachers: it was considered immoral. If music is immoral, then there can be no question about dancing, and yet in ancient India even princesses were taught dancing and used to dance before the public. Music, painting, dancing, all these were publicly encouraged.⁶

On another occasion, when a reference was made to Armando Menezes's book of poems, *Chaos and Dancing Star*, Sri Aurobindo quipped: "The Dancing Star will be taken for a cinema star!"⁷

From time to time, discussion would be sparked off by misrepresentations in biographies of Sri Aurobindo. In one of them, by Promode Sen, it was mentioned that Sri Aurobindo knew Hebrew; on being told about it, Sri Aurobindo queried laughingly: "Why not say that I knew Amhari and other African languages?" He also referred

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵ Nirodbaran, 'Talks with Sri Aurobindo', *Mother India*, March 1971, p. 89.

⁶ *ibid.*, *Mother India*, July 1969, p. 396.

⁷ *ibid.*, *Mother India*, March 1971, p. 89.

to the 'miracles' he was supposed to have performed, according to Motilal Mehta's biography. Once on being told that he couldn't see Sri Aurobindo, a visitor had ingenuously asked the Mother: "Does he fly away?"⁸ In a similar context on a subsequent occasion, Sri Aurobindo said:

I shall have to write my Autobiography in order to contradict my biographers. I shall have to title my book, 'What I Did Not Do in My Life'.⁹

Again, commenting on P. B. Kulkarni's biography, Sri Aurobindo said on 10 March 1943: "The general impression he creates is that I must have been a very serious prig, all very pious and serious. I was nothing of the kind."¹⁰

But of course, during the war years (1939-45), the fluctuating fortunes of the Allies, the performance on the several theatres of the war, the relative merits of the statesmen and Generals on the two warring sides, the ambiguous gyrations of the neutral powers, the impact of the war with its vicissitudes on Indian political life, the probable course of future events, all came up for comment day after day. For Sri Aurobindo, retirement and spirituality did not mean a total indifference to what was happening in the world. The daily *Hindu* and other papers and magazines helped him to follow happenings in India and outside, and after the war started, arrangements were made to enable Sri Aurobindo to listen to news broadcasts, the war speeches of Allied leaders like Churchill, Roosevelt and General de Gaulle, and also war commentaries, from a radio installed in Pavitra's room

⁸ *Evening Talks*, First Series, p. 124.

⁹ *Mother India*, January 1970, p. 789.

¹⁰ *Evening Talks*, First Series, p. 132.

and relayed to Sri Aurobindo's room. The meteoric rise of Hitler in Germany and the dire possibilities flowing from it were a source of anxious concern to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, for they could not only see the Fuehrer for what he seemed to be, a ruthless dictator, but also see behind him the Asuric forces that were trying to make use of him for their own purposes. The sacrifice of Edouard Benes in 1938 by Chamberlain and Daladier to appease Hitler showed how by practising brinkmanship the Fuehrer had got what he wanted without firing a single shot. But both sides were merely playing for time, and by mid-1939 it was clear that Hitler did mean business this time. He signed a pact with Russia, and ordered his troops to attack Poland on 1 September. Hitler had his admirers even in India, and it was not unusual to bracket him with Napoleon. Sri Aurobindo saw how foolish the comparison was, and he expressed this in a poem 'The Dwarf Napoleon', written on 16 October 1939, six weeks after the war had started, and about a month after Poland had been overrun:

Napoleon's mind was swift and bold and vast,
His heart was calm and stormy like the sea,
His will dynamic in its grip and clasp.
His eye could hold a world within its grasp
And see the great and small things sovereignly...
Far other this creature of a nether clay,
Void of all grandeur, like a gnome at play,
Iron and mud his nature's mingled stuff...
Violent and cruel, devil, child and brute,
This screaming orator with his strident tongue,
The prophet of a scanty fixed idea,
Plays now the leader of our human march...¹¹

¹¹ *More Poems*, pp. 56-7.

II

During the first months — the period of the so-called ‘phoney war’ — when the French army sat pretty behind the Maginot Line and Hitler and Stalin were allowed to overrun Poland from opposite sides and to partition it, Sri Aurobindo — according to his own admission — “did not actively concern himself” with the course of the war. But when it appeared as if Hitler might crush all forces opposed to him and create conditions for Nazism to dominate the world, Sri Aurobindo began to intervene.¹² While following the events with interest and anxiety, he thought at first that, after all, the French army and the British Navy were both powerful instruments of war with great traditions, and hence Hitler wouldn’t be allowed to put out the light of freedom all over Europe. But the events of the next seven or eight months were to throw a revealing light on the relative strength of the opposing forces and put a new complexion on the developing world crisis.

Although Hitler was at first impatient to follow up his lightning success in Poland by a decisive attack on France, the operation had to be postponed from time to time throughout the 1939-40 winter months, and Neville Chamberlain misinterpreted this lull for weakness, and as late as 5 April 1940 he publicly declared that Hitler “had missed the bus”. In France there was a change of government in March, Reynaud replacing Daladier. Sri Aurobindo thought that such unsteadiness looked like a bad sign, but added that Reynaud was the more intelligent man; “in fact, he is the only intelligent Minister,

¹² *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 69.

they say".¹³ Actually, when Hitler struck at last, it took the Allied powers by surprise. First he invaded Denmark and Norway on 9 April, and by adopting the tactics of surprise and attack in overwhelming force, occupied both countries — notwithstanding the opposition put up by the loyal forces and the Allied expeditionary force in Norway. The role of Quisling — the Norwegian traitor-stooge of Hitler — particularly disgusted Sri Aurobindo, who was also surprised at the ineffectiveness of the British Navy. On 10 April 1940 Sri Aurobindo said: "hitherto Germany has not proved superior to the British Navy. But it depends on what proportion of the Navy is there.... If they (Britain and France) had possessed foresight, they would have gathered their fleet near about".¹⁴ On 15 April, when the disastrous happenings in Norway were the theme of the conversation, Sri Aurobindo said:

This Quisling of Norway should have been shot. Do you know what he has done? When the Norwegians were defending Trondjheim with their coastal batteries, Quisling sent them directions to stop fighting, and when they knew that Quisling had betrayed them, it was too late.¹⁵

But even before the Allied forces could pull out of Norway, Hitler struck against Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France on 10 May 1940. The ruse of dropping by parachute German soldiers in Dutch and French uniforms to demoralise the Allies elicited the comment

¹³ Nirodbaran, 'Talks with Sri Aurobindo', *Mother India*, May 1969, p. 250. Earlier, on 9 December 1939, Sri Aurobindo had described Daladier as a "weak man, and weak men go into unnecessary violence at times," the reference being to an intemperate speech against Russia.

¹⁴ *Mother India*, October 1969, p. 612.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, January 1970, p. 786.

from Sri Aurobindo: "This Hitler seems to have a romantic head!"¹⁶ Every day — every hour almost — gave news of Hitler's triumphant march, and for his devilish ingenuities too there seemed to be no end.

In the meantime, there was an all-party attack in the British Parliament on Chamberlain's conduct of the war, and accordingly he resigned as Prime Minister, making way for Churchill. Sri Aurobindo thought Churchill had formed a strong Government, and on 15 May he remarked:

It is a remarkable Ministry. Most of the ablest men of England are there, except Hore-Belisha and Lloyd George. As I expected, Morrison and Bevan have been taken. Morrison is one of the best organisers. Their coming in will help to prevent any quarrel with Labour".¹⁷

He also felt that the inclusion of Amery as the India Secretary might not, after all, be a bad thing, for he had said in an interview that India would soon have to be considered as independent.

The change in Government didn't at once change the direction of events in Europe. There were news only of fresh German victories. Rotterdam fell. The Maginot Line was being rendered innocuous. The Nazi divisions — including the all-powerful Panzer-divisions — were cutting across the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, and the Allied High Command could hardly recover from the suddenness and force of the Hitlerian onslaught. Regarding the neutral nations' hesitant behaviour, Sri Aurobindo remarked:

The neutrals wanted to make the best of both worlds. If Germany does not attack, they remain

¹⁶ *ibid.*, April 1970, p. 142. ¹⁷ *ibid.*, May 1970, p. 204.

neutral. If she attacks, they know that the Allies will come to their help.¹⁸

Earlier, Sri Aurobindo had said that Denmark and Norway ought to have known about Hitler's movements and made some secret agreement with the Allies; it was their "imbecility" that was responsible for their plight. This no doubt applied to Holland too. Already the German army, by a surprise move, had moved swiftly through the Ardennes, crossed the French border on 12 May, and the Meuse the next day; and by 20 May, the Germans were at Abbeville. The Dutch and the Belgians capitulated without more ado, and the British expeditionary force and the French first army were isolated, a ready prey almost to the converging German forces. Between 27 May and 4 June, however, the Allies succeeded in evacuating 338,400 (mainly British) from the beaches and harbour of Dunkirk. It was a remarkable operation short of the miraculous. On the other hand, the Germans relentlessly pressed on toward Paris. General Weygand (who had replaced General Gamelin) was unable to stop the rot, and on 14 June Paris itself was occupied by the Germans. Churchill's bold and imaginative offer of a union with France was rejected by the French Government (an action that was deplored by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother) — and on 16 June, Reynaud resigned, and the aged Marshal Petain formed a new Government with the sole aim of making peace with Hitler on any terms whatsoever. Mussolini's attack of France from the rear on 11 June and some easy conquests in that area further demoralised the French and compelled them to make an ignominious peace with the triumphant Hitler. A shaken and battered Britain was

¹⁸ *ibid.*, April 1970, p. 143.

now left alone to face the might of Hitler, with most of Western Europe under his grip.

It was Hitler's expectation that, France thus humiliated and put out of action, all Northern Europe brought under the Nazi control or sphere of influence, and the East secured (as he thought) from Russian attack, Britain also would throw up the game and sue for peace. But on 18 June, Churchill reaffirmed in Parliament the determination of his Government to fight on, whatever the hazard. Even in France, the capitulation was not total, for General de Gaulle denounced Petain and the Armistice, and the Free French forces joined hands with the British to continue the war. Thus a month passed without Britain responding to Hitler's discreet peace feelers through neutral Sweden, and he had therefore no option but to decide upon a massive invasion of Britain ('Operation Sea-Lion') preceded by heavy air raids to weaken the morale of the people and to immobilise or destroy the defence machinery. Thus began the crucial 'Battle of Britain'. On 12 August a fierce air battle was fought, and on 15 August an even fiercer battle, in which the Luftwaffe lost 180 planes and retired in discomfiture. It was during those dark days of August 1940, when the future of Britain and the future of freedom hung as by a slender thread, when there were not wanting people everywhere who felt dazzled by Hitler's victories and displays of power out of the ordinary, it was then that Sri Aurobindo wrote that powerful poem, 'The Children of Wotan (1940)', a remorselessly vivid projection of the Hell that Nazi world-dominion would come to mean. It is cast in the form of question and answer, and while it is the conscience of mankind that articulates the questions, the answers are trotted out by the Asuric Nazi hordes that

are the 'children of Wotan':

"Where is the end of your armoured march, O children
of Wotan?

Earth shudders with fear at your tread, the death-flame
laughs in your eyes."

"We have seen the sign of Thor and the hammer of new
creation...

We march to make of earth a hell and call it heaven.

The heart of mankind we have smitten with the whip
of the sorrows seven;

The Mother of God lies bleeding in our black and
gold-sunrise."

Does the broken world raise its heart-rending cries? But
the 'Children of Wotan' reckon not:

"Question the volcano when it burns, chide the fire and
bitumen!...

We are pitiless, mighty and glad, the gods fear
our laughter inhuman.

Our hearts are heroic and hard; we bear the belt of
Orion:

Our will has the edge of the thunderbolt, our acts are
the claws of a lion."

Aren't they afraid of divine retribution, their "fate in
the scales of God"? Indeed "No", they answer:

"We mock at God, we have silenced the mutter of
priests at his altar.

Our leader is master of Fate, medium of her mysteries.

We have made the mind a cypher, we have strangled
Thought with a cord.

Dead now are pity and honour, strength only is
Nature's lord.

We build a new world-order; our bombs shout Wotan's
peace...

Its party's grim totalitarian reign
The cruel destiny of breathing things.
All on one plan was shaped and standardised
Under a dark dictatorship's breathless weight.²⁰

It was more than mere human foresight — it was more than a poet's fancy or imagination — that inferred so unambiguously and described so arrestingly the full implications of the threat of Nazi world dominion. Sri Aurobindo saw as in a flash all the grim possibilities even in 1940, and the words came under compulsion as it were — words of warning that were to arrest the Rake's Progress towards the "satanic age".

III

15 August 1940 was the day Hitler had originally fixed for victory over Britain or Britain's capitulation, but the air battle went decisively against him that day. It was one of the turning points in the prolonged 'Battle of Britain'. These massive air raids continued all the same for months afterwards, but the R. A. F. fighter-pilots did a marvellous job and turned back the invader every time, with mounting losses. From 7 to 15 September, there were raids on London, and several hundreds of bombers and fighters were deployed by the Luftwaffe, but the enemy couldn't achieve air mastery over Britain, which was the essential condition for a successful invasion from the Continent. By 12 October, the idea of invasion was indefinitely postponed — and as good as dropped. Britain the bastion of freedom was saved, and freedom-lovers everywhere could now heave a sigh of relief.

²⁰ *Savitri*, p. 243.

The war unleashed on Europe by Hitler had its unavoidable repercussions on the Indian sub-continent. At the time of Hitler's invasion of Poland, popular Governments were functioning in the different States, while at the Centre the Viceroy's Executive Council was *not* responsible to the Legislative Assembly. With Britain and France ranged against Hitler, India (including French India) was involved in the hostilities too. The Congress was undecided as to what it should do. In so far as the Allies stood for freedom and democracy, the Congress leaders were with them rather than with the Axis Powers. But Britain and France were Colonial Powers as well, and this confused issues. Gandhi and Nehru alike openly expressed their sympathies with the Polish in their hour of trial, but the support to the Allies in their war effort was hedged in with conditions. The kind of response that the Congress wanted — namely, a clarification of the Allied war aims so as to include a positive statement about the future of the Colonies — was not forthcoming, and the Congress therefore asked its Ministries in the several States to resign. When asked for his opinion about this development, Sri Aurobindo said:

How can I say? It depends on what they do next and how they work things out. Now-a-days there are no more resolutions, only speeches. Gandhi's and Nehru's resolutions are speeches.²¹

Towards the close of 1939, Surendra Mohan Ghose — a former revolutionary and the President of the Bengal Congress Committee at the time — was in Pondicherry, and when he suggested that Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo should meet and discuss things, the latter agreed: "He

²¹ Nirodbaran, 'Talks with Sri Aurobindo', *Mother India*, May 1971, p. 255.

can come now; whatever political difference there was is no more. He can see me. You may convey this to him".²² This was done, but before he could arrange the meeting as requested by Gandhiji, Surendra Mohan had to offer "individual satyagraha", and was jailed again; and the interview between Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo did not, after all, take place.

The withdrawal of the Congress Ministries, the truculence of Mr. Jinnah and the Muslim League, the launching of individual satyagraha, the ignoble course of the 'phoney war', the cold cynicism behind the partition of Poland between Germany and Russia, and the steep rise in the prices of essential commodities were among the factors that contributed to the confused political thinking in India at the time. The Congress was symbolically against *both* Hitler and the Allies! Under the circumstances it was inevitable that some people in India should deviate into a pronounced anti-British and hence pro-Hitler stance, applauding his victories and secretly (or even openly) gloating over the Allies' discomfiture.

At the Ashram in Pondicherry, too, opinion was divided among the sadhaks. It was known that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were apprehensive of the formidable Asuric power of Hitler, and that their sympathies were wholly with the Allies. In war-time, not to be with the Government was to be branded anti-Government, and to be forced to accept the consequences. The French administration in Pondicherry was, perhaps, even more sensitive to criticism than the British in India. After the first excitement of the Polish invasion and conquest and of Russia's invasion of Poland in December 1939, the tempo

²² From a lecture delivered at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, early in 1971 and reproduced in *Mother India*, February 1971, p. 29.

had more or less subsided till Hitler's *blitzkrieg* in April and May made things very serious indeed. At such a time, pro-Hitler sympathies could provoke fierce counter-action. Thus, when Sri Aurobindo came to know that it was not just five or six Ashramites but more than half were in sympathy with Hitler and wanted him to win, he said on the evening of 17 May:

It is a serious matter. The Government can dissolve the Ashram at any moment. In Indo-China, all religious bodies have been dissolved. And here the whole of Pondicherry is against us. It is only because Governor Bonvin is friendly to us that they can't do anything. But even he — if he hears that people in the Ashram are pro-Hitler — will be compelled to take steps....

If these people want that the Ashram should be dissolved, they can come and tell me, and I will dissolve it, instead of the police doing it. They have no idea about the world, and talk like little children. Hitlerism is the greatest menace that the world has ever met. If Hitlerism wins, do they think India has any chance of being free?... He is openly talking of world-empire....²³

This was a forthright declaration, yet full of compassion. Foreknowledge was a cross, and only Sri Aurobindo knew how much was at stake. They talked "like little children"; it was ignorance more than perversity; and he could neither let them down, nor be inattentive to his own clear intuitions about the menace of Hitlerism. The Mother too had spoken the same morning to Nolini about the situation:

It is treachery against Sri Aurobindo to wish for

²³ *Mother India*, June 1970, p. 266.

Hitler's victory. Sri Aurobindo's cause is closely connected with that of the Allies, and he is working night and day for it.... If Hitler or Stalin wins, spirituality is doomed.²⁴

On 20 May 1940, again, Sri Aurobindo said that Hitler was actually possessed by the Asura, or perhaps was an incarnation of the Asura: "The Vital World has descended upon the physical. That is why the intellectuals are getting perplexed at the destruction of their civilisation, of all the values they had made and stood by". The next morning, on coming to know that some people were glad of the fall of Holland, Sri Aurobindo spoke out with a touch of exasperation:

Very strange! And yet they want freedom for India! That is one thing I can't swallow. How can they have sympathy for Hitler who is destroying other nations, taking away their liberty? It is not only pro-Ally sympathy but sympathy for humanity that they are jeering at....²⁵

A week later, when the course of the war had taken a decisive turn against the Allies, he was asked what message should be sent to a correspondent who needed guidance; and Sri Aurobindo said simply:

You may tell him that God's Front is the spiritual front, which is still lagging behind. Hitler's Germany is not God's Front. It is the Asuric Front, through which the Asura aims at world domination. It is the descent of the Asuric world upon the human to establish its own power on the earth.²⁶

Presently the "epic of Dunkirk" was enacted, the Germans reached Paris, and France capitulated. French

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 267. ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 268.

²⁶ *ibid.*, February 1971, p. 20.

India, however, like many other French Colonies, declared for General de Gaulle's Free French movement, and this was very much to the liking of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. And yet it was just at this time, when Britain stood practically all alone against Hitler's might, that worldly-wise people in India (and elsewhere) thought, as had General Weygand: "In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken"! On the other hand, the dauntless leadership of Churchill, the course of the Battle of Britain, the silent support of Roosevelt's U. S. A., the failure of the Luftwaffe to gain air mastery over Britain, and the gathering strength of the Free French under General de Gaulle slowly effected a change in attitude in the minds of all those who were prepared to pause and think and judge by these clearly discernible trends.

During the latter half of 1940, Hitler and Mussolini extended willy nilly the theatre of the war to the Balkans and North Africa. Japan was also wooed to throw in her lot with the Axis Powers, but she held back for the time being. Then, on 21 June 1941, Germany attacked Russia on a wide front, and made rapid progress and won sensational victories. Although Russia had earlier ignored Britain's secret warnings of the planned attack, Churchill now openly came out on the side of Russia. After over five months' of humiliating retreat and terrific loss of men and territory, Russia counter-attacked on 6 December with astonishing success. On 7 December, Japan bombed Pearl Harbour, and on 11 December Hitler declared war against America. Japan also turned against the British, French and Dutch possessions in the Far East, bombed Calcutta, Visakhapatnam and Madras, and extended the war in the Pacific. Now it was truly a world

war. And Britain didn't stand alone any longer; Russia and America were with her.

Just as Sri Aurobindo actively concerned himself with the war in Europe when he realised in April-May 1940 that Hitlerism was trying to overwhelm the forces of freedom, he felt equally concerned when Japan made the perfidious attack on Pearl Harbour and turned against India and South-East Asia. Even before Hitler's attack on Russia, the Mother with Sri Aurobindo's authority had declared on 6 May 1941:

It has become necessary to state emphatically and clearly that all who by their thoughts and wishes are supporting and calling for the victory of the Nazis are by that very fact collaborating with the Asura against the Divine and helping to bring about the victory of the Asura.

And Sri Aurobindo and the Mother made a contribution to the Viceroy's War Purposes Fund, and jointly signed a letter to the Governor of Madras stating their position without qualification or ambiguity:

We feel that, not only is this a battle waged in just self-defence and in defence of the nations threatened with the world domination of Germany and the Nazi system of life, but it is a defence of civilisation and its highest attained social, cultural and spiritual values and of the whole future of humanity. To this cause our support and sympathy will be unswerving whatever may happen; we look forward to the victory of Britain and, as the eventual result, an era of peace and union among nations and a better and more secure world-order. There was, indeed, never any wavering; they could see very clearly the issues at stake, and they made no secret

of their commitment to the Allied cause.²⁷

Aside from the modest monetary contribution to the War Purposes Fund, the advice to disciples asking them to join the fighting services if they could, and the open declaration of his adhesion to the Allied cause, Sri Aurobindo's essential action was of an occult and spiritual character. As he has himself acknowledged:

Inwardly, he put his spiritual force behind the Allies from the moment of Dunkirk.... This he did, because he saw that behind Hitler and Nazism were dark Asuric forces and that their success would mean the enslavement of mankind to the tyranny of evil, and a set-back to the cause of evolution and especially to the spiritual evolution of mankind; it would lead also to the enslavement not only of Europe but of Asia, and in it of India, an enslavement far more terrible than any this country had ever endured, and the undoing of all the work that had been done for her liberation.²⁸

What exactly this "spiritual force" was, how it operated, with what success and with whom—these are still matters that do not permit of clear analysis and statement. Reference has been made earlier to Sri Aurobindo's claim in a letter written on 12 July 1911—probably to Motilal Roy of Chandernagore—about his being able to put himself "into men and change them, removing the darkness and bringing light, giving them a new heart and a new mind".²⁹ During the intervening thirty years, this power

²⁷ The late M.N. Roy was another ex-revolutionary who also saw the issues clearly—though only from his rationalist point of view—and openly pleaded for support to the Allies.

²⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 69-70.

²⁹ Writing on 'Foresight' in February 1950, the Mother too has said:

had evidently grown and proved susceptible to purposive application. But being still an Overmental — not a Supramental — power, it was not certain of success or of total success under all circumstances. Much must depend also on the receptivity of the instrument, the nature of the field of action, the concentration of Asuric forces at any particular point or in the individual or group against whom the force was being directed. As he explained later (July 1947) in a letter to K. D. Sethna:

...the spiritual force I have been putting on human affairs such as the War is not the supramental but the Overmind force... when it acts in the material world (it) is so inextricably mixed up in the tangle of the lower world forces that its results, however strong or however adequate to the immediate object, must necessarily be partial.³⁰

A global consciousness, even when it is rather less than the Supramental Truth-Consciousness, carries with it knowledge as well as power, and thus, although cooped up to all intents and movements in a small room in a far corner of South India, Sri Aurobindo's consciousness ranged over men and affairs and developments all over the world, and whenever it chose to act, or could act, as a power behind the scenes — and true consciousness *is* power, if anything — it did have a salutary influence: at any rate, even when apparently ineffective, it left open the possibility of future rectification. Some media were more responsive than most others: some threw back the influence, denied the light — with serious consequences. There are instances of people — soldiers, prisoners of war,

"By Yogic discipline one can, not only foresee destiny, but can alter it, change it almost wholly."

³⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 245.

politicians — who had been sustained in moments of life's extremity by the Vision of a Figure that only later they could recognise as that of Sri Aurobindo. But the true and complete story of Sri Aurobindo's occult ministry among combatants and non-combatants alike cannot as yet be told.

IV

In the early months of 1942, Britain's position in the Far East was most vulnerable. By mid-February, Singapore had fallen, the Malaysian peninsula had been overrun, and still there was no halting of the advance of Japanese arms. In this critical situation, the people of India heard only confused counsels. While Jinnah talked of the "Muslim Nation", Gandhi swore by non-violence. Subhas Chandra Bose had in the meantime joined hands with the Japanese and formed an "army of liberation" or the Indian National Army. Nehru felt overtaken by events and enacted the role of an Indian Hamlet. The question of questions was: Were Indians now at least to cooperate with the British to resist a possible Japanese invasion, or were they to welcome the Japanese as liberators, — or were they to do just nothing? On 11 March 1942, Churchill rose to the occasion and offered to create a new Indian Union with a Dominion Constitution to be framed by India's own representatives after the war. In the meantime, Indian leaders were invited to participate in a responsible Central Government and help the Allies to prosecute the war to the point of victory. Presently, Sir Stafford Cripps came to India to work out the details, and on 31 March 1942, Sri Aurobindo openly welcomed his mission in forthright terms:

I have heard your broadcast. As one who has been a nationalist leader and worker for India's independence, though now my activity is no longer in the political but in the spiritual field, I wish to express my appreciation of all you have done to bring about this offer. I welcome it as an opportunity given to India to determine for herself, and organise in all liberty of choice, her freedom and unity, and take an effective place among the world's free nations. I hope that it will be accepted, and right use made of it, putting aside all discords and divisions. I hope too that friendly relations between Britain and India replacing the past struggles will be a step towards a greater world union in which, as a free nation, her spiritual force will contribute to build for mankind a better and happier life. In this light, I offer public adhesion, in case it can be of any help in your work.

India's future — the need for unity of purpose and action — the future of Indo-British relations — the future of global unity — and India's role in a World Union, all are referred to in the Message, and nothing could have been more explicit than the sense of urgency he had imported into his words. Going further, he conveyed personal messages to both C. Rajagopalachari and B. S. Moonje, and sent S. Doraiswami Aiyar as a personal emissary to the Congress Working Committee that was to meet at Delhi. India had more to fear from Japanese imperialism than from the British which was on its way out. It would be better to get into the seats of power, now that the chance had come, without squeamishly arguing about the exact legal basis of the power. It was, again, an opportunity for Hindus and Muslims to work

together and thereby invalidate the "two nations" theory. And, above all, it was necessary to organise the collective strength of the country and repel the danger from Japan.³¹

It was all in vain. The Congress leaders — taking their cue, perhaps, from Gandhi's reported dismissal of the Cripps Proposals as a "post-dated cheque on a bank that was crashing" — thought that Britain was clearly fighting a losing war, and hence shied away from the invitation to join the Government. Divine wisdom was thus vetoed by shortsighted political calculation, and the possibility of a free *and* united India was jeopardised irreparably. As K. M. Munshi acknowledged in a speech at Delhi later (16 August 1951):

He (Sri Aurobindo) saw into the heart of things.... His perception of the political situation in India was always unerring. When the world war came in 1939... it was he of the unerring eye who said that the triumph of England and France was the triumph of the divine forces over the demoniac forces.... He spoke again when Sir Stafford Cripps came with his first proposal. He said, 'India should accept it'. We rejected the advice... but today we realise that if the first proposal had been accepted, there would have been no partition, no refugees, and no Kashmir problem.³²

Commenting on this sad chapter of India's recent history, Nirodbaran has said recently that Sri Aurobindo sent his personal emissary to Delhi because he saw that Cripps had come "on the wave of a great inspiration" and it was incumbent on the Congress to make the right

³¹ See Sisirkumar Mitra, *The Liberator* (Jaico Edition, 1970), pp. 217-8.

³² *The Advent*, November 1951, pp. 304-5. In July 1971, we might add: "No Bangla Desh tragedy either."

response. But his mission failed, and Cripps's mission failed:

There is such a thing as fate. When this Mission failed we told him (Sri Aurobindo), "You see, your mission has failed". He said, "I knew it would!" And we pounced on this pronouncement: "If you knew, why did you send your emissary?" He smiled in his usual enigmatic way, and looking up said: "Well, I have done a bit of '*kartavya karma*' (disinterested work)."²²

To make matters worse, the Congress launched the 'Quit India' movement in August 1942, which further confused the main issue. Of the senior Congress leaders, only Rajagopalachari stood apart, and in fact pleaded that the Allies should be supported because theirs was the more righteous cause, and also the winning side; and India's good too was inextricably bound up with the success of the Allies. 'Quit India' notwithstanding, during the latter years of the war, the Indian army — greatly strengthened by the new recruits — became a notable fighting instrument and acquired much valuable experience in the tasks of offensive and defensive war.

It was towards the end of 1942 that the tide of war in Europe took an unmistakable turn against Hitler. The German army of 22 divisions near Stalingrad was surrounded, and on 31 January 1943 the Russians captured or annihilated what remained of the encircled army, and Field Marshal von Paulus was himself taken prisoner. The position of the Allies in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific steadily improved thereafter during 1943 and 1944. By mid-1944 the Americans from the West and the Russians from the East were sweeping towards the

²² *Mother India*, December 1969, p. 691.

German frontiers. "The 15th of August (1944) was the worst day of my life", Hitler was to moan later. And yet the war continued till next spring, and it was only a week after Hitler's suicide on 30 April 1945 that the German forces surrendered unconditionally; and Japan followed on 15 August. Anyone who reads today the nightmarish history of those times and sees the Asuric maniac in Hitler will still feel surprised that, as early as 1939 and even earlier still,³⁴ Sri Aurobindo should have so correctly measured up the menace of the "Dwarf Napoleon" and the Fuehrer of the "Children of Wotan". And wasn't Sri Aurobindo thinking of Hitler, and of the Nazis, and of the concentration camps, and of the gas chambers, when he projected these images of infernal perversion in *Savitri*:

An insolence reigned of cold stone-hearted strength
 Mighty, obeyed, approved by the Titan's law,
 The huge laughter of a giant cruelty
 And fierce glad deeds of ogre violence.
 In that wide cynic den of thinking beasts
 One looked in vain for a trace of pity and love...
 Armed with the aegis of tyrannic Power,
 Signing the edicts of her dreadful rule
 And using blood and torture as a seal,
 Darkness proclaimed her slogans to the world.³⁵

But in 1942 and immediately after — with 'Quit India' in the air, with shortages of all kinds, with famine raging in Bengal and elsewhere — it was not easy in India to look at happenings in the right perspective. Doubts still

³⁴ In 1934, in the course of a letter, Sri Aurobindo had referred to "earthquakes and Hitlers and a collapsing civilisation" (*Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Second Series, p. 342).

³⁵ *Savitri*, p. 244.

assailed people regarding the outcome of the war. Hitler continued to cast a fatal spell on certain types of morbidly romantic people. And some thought that to fight even a defensive war was to sin against the holy principle of Ahimsa. And, above all, how could — so the question formulated itself — how could the Allied war be called a *dharma yuddha*? Were the Allies the modern Pandavas? — and were their enemies the neo-Kauravas?

Comparisons are often misleading and even at best are liable to be misunderstood. On 29 July 1942, Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple underlining the deeper implications of the war. Superficially, of course, rival nations and opposing armies were engaged in the struggle. But behind the rulers, the armies and even the peoples, certain forces were striving for mastery, and the issue of the struggle would decide whether mankind was going to evolve into a higher stage or relapse into barbarism:

...it is a struggle for an ideal that has to establish itself on earth in the life of humanity, for a Truth that has yet to realise itself fully and against a darkness and falsehood that are trying to overwhelm the earth and mankind in the immediate future. It is the forces behind the battle that have to be seen and not this or that superficial circumstance... if one side wins... there will be a reign of falsehood and darkness, a cruel oppression and degradation for most of the human race such as people in this country do not dream of and cannot yet at all realise. If the other side that has declared itself for the free future of humanity triumphs, this terrible danger will have been averted and conditions will have been created in which there will be a

chance for the Ideal to grow, for the Divine Work to be done, for the spiritual Truth for which we stand to establish itself on earth.

Over a year later — when the position had eased somewhat for the Allies — the question was raised again by Dilip Kumar Roy, and Sri Aurobindo took this opportunity to set forth in detail his point of view in a long letter, the full text of which has only recently been published.³⁶ The Allies were by no means blameless paragons; only they happened to “stand on the side of evolutionary forces”. Britain, France, U.S.A. were the nations that had spread the ideas of democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity. Their histories were no doubt dyed with Colonialist sins, but the forces of enlightenment had been active too. Britain herself was gradually moving away from imperialism, and towards the Commonwealth ideal: and this was “evolution in the right direction — however slow and imperfect and hesitating”. Was there discernible a similar trend in the protestations of the Axis Powers? Nazi Germany avowedly and openly stood only “for the reversal of this evolutionary tendency, for a reversion, not only to the past, but a far-back primitive and barbaric ideal”. Sri Aurobindo continued:

There can be no doubt or hesitation here; if we are for the evolutionary future of mankind, we must recognise that it is only the victory of the Allies that can save it. At the very least, they are at the moment the instruments of the evolutionary Forces to save mankind's future.... The Allies at least stand for human values, though they may often have acted against their own best ideals (human

³⁶ The letter, dated 3 September 1943, appears along with Dilip Kumar Roy's in *Mother India*, May 1971, pp. 241-6.

beings always do that); Hitler stands for diabolical values or for human values exaggerated in the wrong way until they become diabolical (e.g. the "virtues" of the *Herrenvolk*, the master race). That does not make the English or Americans nations of spotless angels nor the Germans a wicked and sinful race, but as an indicator it has a decisive importance.

As regards Nolani's giving the Kurukshetra example, it was not meant to be taken as an exact parallel in every minute particular; Kurukshetra was but "a traditional instance of a war between two world-forces in which the side favoured by the Divine triumphed, because its leaders made themselves his instruments". There was no idea that Cripps should be equated with Yudhistira, Churchill with Bhima, or General Montgomery with Arjuna! On a total view, the Allied was undoubtedly the righteous cause, that was all. As for the Hitler-Duryodhana equation, well,—"Duryodhana, if alive, might complain indignantly that the comparison was a monstrous and scandalous injustice to him and that he never did anything like Hitler has done". It was necessary not to be distracted by appearances, nor to be side-tracked by false similitudes. Then came the masterly conclusion:

The Divine takes men as they are and uses them as His instruments even if they are not flawless in character, without stain or flaw, exemplary in virtue, or angelic, holy and pure. If they are of good will, if, to use the Biblical phrase, they are on the Lord's side, that is enough for the work to be done. Even if I knew that the Allies (I am speaking of the big nations, America, Britain and China) would misuse

their victory or bungle the peace or partially at least spoil the opportunities open to the human world by that victory, I would still put my force behind them. At any rate things could not be one-hundredth part as bad as they would be under Hitler. The ways of the Lord would still be open — to keep them open is what matters.

As for *ahimsā*, didn't Krishna urge Arjuna to fight, assuring him: "*Mayaivete nihatā pūrvameva nimittamātram bhava*" (By Me they are slain already, be thou only my instrument)? In a subsequent letter to Dilip, Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the Indian scriptures and tradition made room for both the spirituality of the renunciation of life and for the spiritual life of action. Works of all kinds — *sarva karmāni* including *ghoram karma* — were valid provided they were done in the right spirit.³⁷

V

Even before the war actually ended in 1945, it was already clear by mid-1944 that, sooner or later, the Allies were going to win, and it was not too early to think of the problems of peace and reconstruction. In India, the stalemate continued: a double stalemate, in fact, — in Indo-British and in Hindu-Muslim relations, respectively. Unfortunately, the Gandhi-Jinnah talks of September 1944 and the prolonged exchange of letters failed to produce a satisfactory agreement. Jinnah wouldn't budge from his demand for Pakistan, and Gandhi couldn't agree to it. The new Viceroy, Lord Wavell, was well-meaning, but a solution eluded him.

³⁷ *Mother India*, August 1970, p. 401.

The results of the post-war elections, too, only confirmed the stalemate in Hindu-Muslim relations. There had meanwhile been a change of Government in Britain, Attlee replacing Churchill; and a Cabinet Mission (comprising Pethick-Lawrence, Cripps and Alexander) came to India with proposals for a three-tier Constitution, and there hovered some hope that the unity of India would be somehow preserved. But communal riots started and raged, now here now there with their ominous chain reactions and serious loss to life and property. The Executive Council or 'Interim Government' worked at cross purposes, the Congress members pulling in one direction and the Muslim Leaguers in another. All efforts, whether in India or in England, to preserve a united India were successfully stalled by Jinnah and his Muslim Leaguers. At last, early in 1947, Attlee sent the Earl of Mountbatten as Viceroy, with the specific charge of effecting the transfer of power before June 1948. Actually, Mountbatten was able to advance the date to 15 August 1947, which would be Sri Aurobindo's 75th birthday as well. But the transfer was to be made to the two new Dominions, India and Pakistan.

Although Sri Aurobindo felt relieved that the Allies had won the war in Europe as well as against Japan, he had no reason to be satisfied with the divisive developments in India. The situation in Bengal — as a result of the riots in Calcutta and Noakhali — particularly distressed him, and he wrote to a correspondent on 19 October 1946 that, although things were bad and might become worse, "we must not let our reaction to it become excessive or suggest despair". Neither the Bengal Hindus nor their culture could be so easily exterminated, and Hitler himself couldn't quite succeed in annihilating the Jewish

people. The need of the hour was courage sustained by faith:

There was a time when Hitler was victorious everywhere and it seemed certain that a black yoke of the Asura would be imposed on the whole world; but where is Hitler now and where is his rule? Berlin and Nuremberg have marked the end of that dreadful chapter in human history. Other blacknesses threaten or even engulf mankind, but they too will end as that nightmare has ended.³⁸

Writing some months later, Sri Aurobindo referred to the sudden eruption of certain difficulties — psychological and other — both in the Ashram and outside, and added:

In the world outside there are much worse symptoms such as the general increase of cynicism, a refusal to believe in anything at all, a decrease of honesty, an immense corruption, a preoccupation with food, money, comfort, pleasure, to the exclusion of higher things, and a general expectation of worse and worse things awaiting the world.... I am not discouraged... after a time, the darkness will fade and begin to disappear and the Light will come.³⁹

When Surendra Mohan Ghose came to Pondicherry and asked for Sri Aurobindo's opinion regarding the proposal for the division of the country, he seems to have said that at that stage the demand could not be resisted, but it should at least not be on a purely communal basis, and people should be given the option to stay in India or to opt for Pakistan. Soon afterwards, Surendra Mohan was summoned by telegram to Pondicherry and entrusted with

³⁸ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 242-3.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 244.

a message to the Congress leaders: "Go and tell Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana, Sardar and Rajendra Prasad that it will be for the good of India and ultimately for the good of the world that they should act on these lines". At the Congress Working Committee, everybody said, "A very good thing, very good", but Sri Aurobindo's proposals were not implemented.¹⁰ We do not know what it was exactly that Sri Aurobindo wanted the Congress leaders to do, but they didn't do it. Neither did they heed Gandhiji's firm advice against the acceptance of partition.

When the decision on partition was made known on 2 June 1947, the Mother issued a statement the next day with the full approval of Sri Aurobindo:

A proposal has been made for the solution of our difficulties in organising Indian independence and it is being accepted with whatever bitterness of regret and searchings of the heart by Indian leaders. It was the "absurdity of our quarrels" that had engendered the partition proposal, and we had to live that absurdity down by accepting the proposal. But with her gift of far vision, the Mother added:

Clearly, this is not a solution; it is a test, an ordeal which, if we live it out in all sincerity, will prove to us that it is not by cutting a country into small bits that we shall bring about its unity and its greatness; it is not by opposing interests against each other that we can win for it prosperity; it is not by setting one dogma against another that we can serve the spirit of Truth. In spite of all, India has a single soul and while we have to wait till we can

¹⁰ These disclosures were made by Surendra Mohan Ghose in a speech delivered early in 1971 at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and reproduced in *Mother India*, February 1971, p. 30.

speak of an India one and indivisible our cry must be:

Let the soul of India live for ever!

What was meant by the "soul of India"? Had a nation — a human aggregate inhabiting an arbitrary geographical area — a "soul"? As if answering these doubts, the Mother explained in the course of a talk on 'The Soul of a Nation' given at about the same time:

A nation is a living personality; it has a soul, even like a human individual. The soul of a nation is also a *psychic* being, that is to say, a conscious being, a formation out of the Divine consciousness and in direct contact with it, a power and aspect of Mahashakti. A nation is not merely the sum total of the individuals that compose it, but a collective personality of which the individuals are as it were cells, like the cells of a living and conscious organism.⁴¹

The slothful logic of expediency, the pros and cons of the arithmetic of selfish party calculation, the fear of the immediate little danger and the ignorance of the bigger ultimate danger, all had conspired to force partition on the country, but at least there was the hope — if not also the assurance — that the "soul of India" wouldn't be rent in two. And so, in the fullness of time, the great Friday dawned — Friday, 15 August 1947, the day of India's independence and Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday as well. In his message for the day, Sri Aurobindo dwelt on the significance of the double event and the possibilities for the future;

I take this coincidence, not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force

⁴¹ *The Advent*, August 1947, pp. 129-30.

that guides my steps on the work with which I began my life, the beginning of its full fruition. Recapitulating the aims and ideals conceived by him in his childhood and youth, Sri Aurobindo put them in their natural order as follows: a revolution which would achieve India's freedom and unity; the resurgence and liberation of Asia; the emergence of 'One World' in the place of the many warring nationalisms; the assumption by India of the spiritual leadership of the human race; and, finally, a revolution in consciousness that would realise in our midst the ideal human society. Missing unity, India had won only "a fissured and broken freedom". Alas, alas:

...the old communal division into Hindus and Muslims seems now to have hardened into a permanent political division of the country. It is to be hoped that this settled fact will not be accepted as settled for ever or as anything more than a temporary expedient. For if it lasts, India may be seriously weakened, even crippled: civil strife may remain always possible, possible even a new invasion and foreign conquest. India's internal development and prosperity may be impeded, her position among the nations weakened, her destiny impaired or even frustrated.

What was the remedy, then? Simply this: "The partition must and will go". It could come about in a natural way:

...by an increasing recognition of the necessity, not only of peace and concord, but of common action, by the practice of common action and the creation of means for that purpose. In this way unity may finally come about under whatever form —But

by whatever means, in whatever way, the division must go; unity must and will be achieved, for it is necessary for the greatness of India's future.

During the long years since this prophetic declaration was made, we have witnessed the fulfilment to the letter of the many fears then expressed: the mounting tension between India and Pakistan, the endemic prevalence of civil strife, the Chinese invasion in 1962, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the terrible strain on our economy, the eruption and genocide in Bangla Desh (East Pakistan) in 1971, the coming of ten million refugees to India, and the death of the "Two Nations Theory" that brought Pakistan into being. But whether -- or when -- and in what manner -- Sri Aurobindo's positive forecast (that the partition "must and will go") would be accomplished is still for the future to unfold. Certain recent events, however, seem to offer a fair hope for the future. Pakistan, alas, was born in violence -- violence in thought, speech and action. But violence used deliberately to gain particular political ends cannot be eschewed early or easily. In G. P. Gooch's words, "The cult of violence does not suddenly lapse; the brutalisation of mind and soul cannot be banished by a stroke of the pen... the craving for quick results breeds impatience with the leisurely process of peace". And so there was the invasion of Kashmir in the wake of the "partition", and the violence that was at first engineered at will either against the Hindu minority in Pakistan or against "Hindu" India was ultimately turned against the Muslim "second-class citizens" or "helots" of East Pakistan (Bangla Desh) on the night of 25 March 1971. And the mad Rake's progress of genocide went on for eight months, and it was a singular circumstance that Sri Aurobindo's birthplace

in Theatre Road, Calcutta, should become for the nonce "Mujib Nagar" — after Banga Bandhu Mujibur Rahman in Pak custody — and keep the embers of Bangla freedom alive during all those doleful and daring months. And since the appetite for violence grows by what it feeds on, on 3 December 1971 Pakistan's Yahya Khan struck against India too (as his predecessor, Ayub Khan, had done in 1965), this time however provoking swift and massive retaliation. Within a fortnight the war was decisively won by India and Bangla Desh, and albeit bruised and bleeding, Bangla has ended forever her helotage to West Pakistan; and the "two nations" theory that was supposed to have justified the partition of August 1947 has now died of its own sickened appetite. Already India and Bangla Desh have forged a union of hearts through their common aspirations, trials and sacrifices. But surely the world hasn't seen the end of miracles. Perhaps President Bhutto and other leaders of West Pakistan will now at least concede the falsity of the "two nations" theory, and annul in one master-stroke of statesmanship the rages and ravages of the last twenty-five years. It is the Phoenix hour, and India, Bangla Desh and what remains of Pakistan could even now form a confederation or a sub-continental economic community, thereby redeeming the poisoned time and remoulding our common destinies. And if such a consummation should be brought about before 15 August 1972, *that* would be the glorious fulfilment of Sri Aurobindo's prophecy that the division must go and that Mother India would again gather *all* her children together.

As regards the other aims and ideals that Sri Aurobindo had cherished, in August 1947 they did seem to be in a process of fulfilment:

Asia has arisen; large parts are now quite free or are at this moment being liberated.... The unification of mankind is under way, though only in an imperfect initiative, organised but struggling against tremendous difficulties. But the momentum is there and, if the experience of history can be taken as a guide, it must inevitably increase until it conquers.... The spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun.... The final dream was a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness.... Here too... the initiative can come from India and, although the scope must be universal, the central movement may be hers.

Such is the content which I put into this date of India's liberation; whether and how far this hope will be justified depends upon the new and free India.

A message nobly tuned to the occasion, conveying a warning as well as a prophecy; but the principal actors on the political scene were too preoccupied with getting into positions of power to heed the warning, and too shortsighted to bother about a Seer's dreams and visions. For men and women of good will, however, for the true children of the Mother who now suddenly felt sundered by the mean calculations of the power-seekers, for the millions — Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Parsis — who still felt they were but the cells and arteries and tissues and blood-corpuscles of India the Benevolent Mother, there came to them on Independence Day the right prayer for the auspicious-anguished occasion, a prayer given by the Mother in her vast compassionate understanding:

O our Mother, O Soul of India, Mother who hast

never forsaken thy children even in the days of darkest depression, even when they turned away from thy voice, served other masters and denied thee, now when they have arisen and the light is on thy face in this dawn of thy liberation, in this great hour we salute thee. Guide us so that the horizon of freedom opening before us may be also a horizon of true greatness and thy true life in the community of the nations. Guide us so that we may be always on the side of great ideals and show to men thy true visage, as a leader in the ways of the spirit and a friend and helper of all the peoples.

The weeks and months following Independence Day were a sore testing time for the country. It was a period of mounting tragedy and colossal frustration. The brief moment of triumph and fulfilment was soon surpassed by shame-faced perplexity and the benumbing sense of fatality. The surgical act of division let loose unimaginable horrors and the desecration of the cherished national values. Tens of thousands were butchered to death, millions were uprooted from their native hearths. And those months witnessed too superhuman endeavours to stem the avalanching poisonous tide of reaction, — endeavours that somehow redeemed the time and slowly reared on the very ruins of shattered unity a fresh new house of integration. Then occurred the culminating crisis of all. On 30 January 1948, Gandhiji was struck down on his way to prayer. The Father of the Nation was no more. "The sun that warmed and brightened our lives has set, and we shiver in the cold and dark" — thus Jawaharlal Nehru feelingly expressed the pressure of agony in the country. Faith itself seemed for a while to cower before giant Despair, and almost ceased to be. Presently, however,

there were signs of reviving faith. When a devotee wired to Sri Aurobindo "Darkness and sorrow spread after Bapuji's death", he replied on 4 February: "Remain firm through the darkness; the light is there and will conquer". And next day his fuller message was broadcast from the All India Radio:

I would have preferred silence in the face of these circumstances that surround us.... This much, however, I will say that the Light which led us to freedom, though not yet to unity, still burns and will burn on till it conquers. I firmly believe that a great and united future is the destiny of this nation and its peoples. The Power that brought us through so much struggle and suffering to freedom, will achieve also, through whatever strife or trouble, the aim which so poignantly occupied the thoughts of the fallen leader at the time of his tragic ending; as it brought us freedom, it will bring us unity. A free and united India will be there and the Mother will gather around her her sons and weld them into a single national strength in the life of a great and united people.

On the other hand, the Kashmir question had bedevilled Indo-Pakistan relations, the scramble for power and position by careerist politicians had become too blatant, the reign of cynicism and corruption was too obvious, and in the outside world too, the former Allies (U.S.A. and U.S.S.R.) were drifting apart, and in China Mao was on the ascendant and Chiang was in retreat. What hope for India? What hope for the world? Asked for his opinion, Sri Aurobindo wrote on 18 July 1948:

I am afraid I can hold out but cold comfort.... Things are bad, are growing worse and may at any

time grow worst or worse than worst if that is possible — and anything however paradoxical seems possible in the present perturbed world.... It is, as in Yoga, where things active or latent in the being have to be put into action in the light so they may be grappled with and thrown out or to emerge from latency in the depths for the same purificatory purpose... night is darkest before dawn and... the coming of dawn is inevitable. But... the new world whose coming we envisage is not to be made of the same texture as the old and different only in pattern... it must come by other means — from within and not from without.⁴²

Later in the year, on 11 December, the National Prize for Humanities was awarded *in absentia* to Sri Aurobindo at the Annual Convocation of the Andhra University. In his citation, Dr. C. R. Reddy the Vice-Chancellor hailed Sri Aurobindo as “the sole sufficing genius of the age”:

He is more than the hero of a nation. He is amongst the Saviours of humanity, who belong to all ages and all nations, the Sanatanas, who leaven our existence with their eternal presence, whether we are aware of it or not.... He is a poet, dramatist, philosopher, critic, interpreter of and commentator on the Vedas, the Gita and all the transcendent lore and legend of India, and he is something higher than these, the Saint who has realised his oneness with the Universal Spirit, and fathomed the depths and brought up treasures of transcendent value and brilliance.⁴³

⁴² *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 246-7.

⁴³ The entire citation was included as Appendix II to the second edition of this book published in 1950, but is omitted in the present third edition.

After reviewing Sri Aurobindo's many-sided achievement as poet, patriot, philosopher and Yogi, Dr. Reddy asked the Chancellor to honour the University — and honour himself too — by awarding the National Prize to Sri Aurobindo. In his Message for the occasion, read out at the Convocation, Sri Aurobindo made a reference to the demand for the formation of "linguistic provinces" and elaborated the theory of unity in diversity as practised in ancient India and as it might still be wisely practised in the altered conditions of our time. Towards the end, he glanced at "the disordered world-situation left by the war, full of risks and sufferings and shortages and threatening another catastrophe" and at the crisis of conscience for India herself:

There are deeper issues for India herself, since by following certain tempting directions she may conceivably become a nation like many others evolving an opulent industry and commerce, a powerful organisation of social and political life, an immense military strength, practising power-politics with a high degree of success... but in this apparently magnificent progression forfeiting her Swadharma, losing her soul. Then ancient India and her spirit might disappear altogether and we would have only one more nation like the others, and that would be a real gain neither to the world nor to us.... It would be a tragic irony of fate if India were to throw away her spiritual heritage at the very moment when in the rest of the world there is more and more a turning towards her for spiritual help and a saving Light... we must not disguise from ourselves the fact that after these long years of subjection and its cramping and impairing

effects a great inner as well as outer liberation and change, a vast inner and outer progress is needed if we are to fulfil India's true destiny.

The twenty-three years since this was said have justified the fears expressed above but not seen the realisation of Sri Aurobindo's ardently cherished hopes. India's map was re-drawn so as to provide for "linguistic" States, but this has been no unmixed blessing, for it has led to endless border claims and disputes regarding the sharing of river waters, and sometimes these are backed by belligerent speeches and violent agitations. Local feeling is increasingly waxing stronger than the feeling for India the Mother. Again, although India has tried through central planning and massive "statism" to evolve "an opulent industry and commerce", in effect this hasn't as yet had any effect whatsoever on what Gandhiji used to call "the grinding poverty" of the masses. Our foreign policy too has failed to yield the expected dividends. The long years of subjection have indeed had their impairing effects, and the "brown sahib" has more often than not proved a worse tyrant than the white one, and the ruling elite is more alienated from the nation's Swabhava and Swadharma than were the foreign rulers.

VI

While the world war with its anxieties, uncertainties and shortages did affect life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, that was more on the surface and couldn't touch the deeper purposes or far aims of the Ashram. It was in 1939-40 that *The Life Divine*, revised and amplified,

came out in two volumes. It was on 15 August 1942 — Sri Aurobindo's seventieth birthday — that his *Collected Poems and Plays* appeared, again in two large volumes. On 15 August 1942 was published also the first number of *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual* from Calcutta, carrying articles on Sri Aurobindo by sadhaks and others. The proliferation of interest in Sri Aurobindo's thought was further exemplified when *The Advent* — "A Quarterly devoted to the Exposition of Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Future" — started coming out from Madras in February 1944. Under the caption 'Ourselves', the editorial in the opening number declared as follows:

Sri Aurobindo's vision enbrings the entire domain of human preoccupations; it embraces and relumes all truths that secretly build and inspire man's integral being — his mental and vital and even physical, his individual as well as collective formations. So one line of our interest will lie in the direction of scanning and understanding human movements — spiritual, intellectual, social, literary or scientific — in the light Sri Aurobindo has shed upon them. Naturally, it is the principles and forces behind external formulations that will principally, if not wholly, engage our attention.

In April 1945, the first number of *Sri Aurobindo Circle* came out from Bombay, rather on the lines of the Calcutta *Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual*. A bolder step was the launching of *Mother India*, a fortnightly from Bombay, edited by K. D. Sethna. It had a wider coverage in theme and aimed at a more popular presentation of views than the *Advent* and the two *Annuals*.

The war meant, among other developments, the coming of children to the Ashram, since several of Sri

Aurobindo's disciples wished to send their families to the safety of the Ashram—and away from areas more directly exposed to the dangers and exigencies of the war. In course of time, this meant (as we saw earlier) the starting of an Ashram School for the children. Beginning, with about 20 pupils on 2 December 1943, the enrolment steadily increased and a hostel too had to be established. The Ashram ideal of integral education meant physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual education in harmonious flowering, but physical education was still the base or stem of the whole, and therefore from the outset the Ashram School gave special importance to sports, games and athletics. During his visit to the Ashram to hand over the National Prize in person to Sri Aurobindo, Dr. C. R. Reddy witnessed an exhibition of games and physical exercises by the Ashram children, and commented on it later with enthusiastic approval:

...this wonderful Ashram in which life and the joy of life are mingled in happy union with spirituality and spiritual progress...

But in many respects what impressed me most were the educational institutions maintained by the Ashram and the ancient spirit of strength and joy that pervades them. The Mother, the embodiment of grace, light and tenderness, ordered an exhibition of games and physical exercises by the boys and girls of the Ashram School. I said to myself, 'If all the schools were like this, won't India be unassailable by internal foes or external? The parades were excellent. The exercises were gone through, not merely efficiently, but cheerfully. The girls... performed hazardous exercises like vaulting. Though there was risk of accident to limb, if not to life,

they advanced, cool, calm and resolute, with bright looks and confident smile, and went through the exercises without a single hitch or a single failure.... She (the Mother) told me that it was the Calcutta killings and the bestial abominations perpetrated on our helpless women and children that made her think of organising the students in her school — boys and girls — into a corps capable of self-defence. At the root is the great Vedic idea that without a strong body you cannot have a strong soul, undaunted in danger and ready to perform the great task, the root principle of all Dharma, of defending the weak and the helpless.⁴⁴

As if to emphasise that the physical was the root of the rest, the first issue of the English-French quarterly journal, *Bulletin of Physical Education*, came out in February 1949, and it has since been a pace-maker for physical education in the country.⁴⁵

But Sri Aurobindo seems to have had a special interest in *Mother India* — he is said to have looked upon it as “My paper” — and he generally approved the views of the editor and the line of argument followed by him even in his articles with a political slant. Sri Aurobindo’s association with the *Bulletin* was, perhaps, closer still, for every issue carried something from him written for it exclusively. For the very first issue (February 1949), he wrote at the Mother’s request a “Message”, and subsequent issues carried a series of seven articles: ‘The Perfection of the body’, ‘The Divine Body’, ‘The Supermind

⁴⁴ *Mother India*, 3 September 1949.

⁴⁵ More recently, the name has been changed to *Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, and it is published in English-French-Hindi.

and the Life Divine', 'Supermind and Humanity', 'Supermind in the Evolution', 'Mind of Light' and 'Supermind and Mind of Light', the last appearing in the issue of November 1950.⁴⁶ In the "Message", Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the "sporting spirit" includes:

...good humour and tolerance and consideration for all, a right attitude and friendliness to competitors and rivals, self-control and scrupulous observance of the laws of the game, fair play and the avoidance of the use of foul means, an equal acceptance of victory or defeat without bad humour, resentment or ill-will towards successful competitors, loyal acceptance of the decisions of the appointed judge, umpire or referee.

These qualities have their value, not only in sport but in life as a whole, and will accelerate "the bringing about of unity and a more harmonious world-order towards which we look as our hope for humanity's future".

There Sri Aurobindo might have stopped if his intention had merely been to give a word of encouragement to the Department of Physical Education in the Ashram. The following series of articles, however, heaved up wave upon wave of a high-arching argument that was, perhaps, a probe into possibility, perhaps the record of a new realisation, and perhaps a hint of imminent happenings — perhaps all three in unison. The ideal should be, not simply a healthy or beautiful mind in a healthy and beautiful body, but rather a perfect and divine life in a perfect and divine body. But, then, what are the badges of the current imperfection of the body and the divorce

⁴⁶ These articles were published as *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth* in 1952, and in America as *The Mind of Light* (1953).

of the Divine from human life? Life in the ignorance, life yoked to the density and obscuration of the mind-life-matter tangle of imperfection and falsity, life alienated from the Divine springs of Sachchidananda! The bringing into action of the sovereign Knowledge-Power or Truth-Consciousness of Supermind could alone change corruption into incorruption, imperfection into perfection, and earth-life into the Life Divine. In 'The Perfection of the Body', Sri Aurobindo said that bodily perfection might ultimately mean the body being "suffused with a light and beauty and bliss from the Beyond", thereby becoming the "body divine". Now, the two basic needs of the human body — food for the maintenance of life and sex for the perpetuation of the species — must both be capable of transcendence in the "divine body". Perhaps the body might one day be able to draw the means of sustenance and self-renewal from the ocean of energy all around and within oneself as well. The Mother too had said in the same issue in the article 'Energy Inexhaustible':

A most powerful help that yogic discipline can bring to the sportsman is to teach him how to renew his energies by drawing them from the undying source of universal energy... there is a source of energy which, once discovered, never dries up, whatever the circumstances and the physical conditions in life. It is the energy that can be described as spiritual, that which is received not from below, from the depths of inconscience, but from above, from the supreme origin of men and the universe, from the all-powerful and eternal splendours of the superconscious. It is there, everywhere around us, penetrating everything, and to enter into contact

with it and to receive it, it is sufficient to sincerely aspire for it...⁴⁷

Like the need for food, the need for sex too might be superseded, and the divine body might come into being "by intervention of an occult force and process".

In the remaining five essays, Sri Aurobindo mingles apparent speculation with possible personal experience and realisation, and introduces, as it were casually, the new concept of 'Mind of Light', a direct power of the Supermind functioning as its accredited agent. In the normal process of evolution, the passage from Mind to Supermind might take aeons after aeons, but if the Supermind itself intervenes from above in the earth-nature — either by itself or through an agent — the pace of evolution may be accelerated, and in the result "evolution would itself evolve" — though it would not change its direction. As an advanced guard, these select men and women charged with the Mind of Light may prove the harbingers of the Supramental Age:

Thus there will be built up, first, even in the Ignorance itself, the possibility of a human ascent towards a divine living; then there will be, by the illumination of this Mind of Light in the greater realisation of what may be called a gnostic mentality, in a transformation of the human being, even before the supermind is reached, even in the earth-consciousness and in a humanity transformed, an illumined divine life.

It would be an intermediate or forerunner race between our mentalised humanity and the ultimate supramentalised Gnostic beings.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Bulletin of Physical Education*, August 1949, pp. 41, 43.

⁴⁸ 'Mind of Light' has already been briefly discussed in an earlier

Along with Sri Aurobindo's articles, the *Bulletin* also carried the Mother's articles that indicated, rather more simply and succinctly, the contours of the Ideal and the direction of the desired and destined transformation:

We are not aiming at success — our aim is perfection. We are not seeking fame or reputation; we want to prepare ourselves for a Divine manifestation.⁴⁹

We want an integral transformation, the transformation of the body and all its activities.⁵⁰

The truth we seek is made up of four major aspects: Love, Knowledge, Power and Beauty.... The psychic will be the vehicle of true and pure love, the mind that of infallible knowledge, the vital will manifest an invincible power and strength, and the body will be the expression of a perfect beauty and a perfect harmony.⁵¹

Sports, tournaments, good works, artistic creation, Yogic discipline, all have but one aim: "transformation", so as to realise perfection. Perfect the individual — perfect the group — and thereby prepare the way for the perfection of the race. During the war years and after, Sri Aurobindo and some of those closest to him in his Ashram were in the vanguard of the battle for a new world. The far-flung struggle in the outside world between the Divine and the Asuric forces had its counterpoint in the Ashram too, but there it was fought on another level and with other instruments. And the Ashram's survival,

chapter (XVIII. 4).

⁴⁹ *Bulletin*, April 1950, p. 17. ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, August 1950, p. 9.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, November 1950, p. 25.

the great and meaningful expansion of its activities, and the widening circles of its influence overflowing the Ashram premisses during the nineteen forties only betokened some of the milestones of the progress and the victory. The arrival of the 'Mind of Light' was but the most significant of these developments.

As Sri Aurobindo surveyed the shifting international scene in the post-war years, he noticed trends instinct with ominous possibilities. The collapse of the Axis Powers was a good thing no doubt, but the new alignment of forces boded ill for the future. Taking advantage of a reissue of *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo wrote a new chapter in 1949, and this appeared as a seventeen-page 'Introduction' in the American edition of the book (1950) and as 'Postscript Chapter' in the *Advent* of February 1950. The war had ended, and the U. N. O. had come into existence; but the spectre of a third world war wasn't exorcised yet:

...the actual danger presents itself rather as a clash between two opposing ideologies, one led by Russia and Red China and trying to impose the Communistic extreme... and on the other side a combination of peoples, partly capitalist, partly moderate socialist who still cling with some attachment to the idea of liberty.... In Asia a more perilous situation has arisen, standing sharply across the way to any possibility of a continental unity of the peoples of this part of the world, in the emergence of a Communist China. This creates a gigantic bloc which could easily englobe the whole of Northern Asia in a combination between two enormous Communist Powers, Russia and China, and would overthrow with a threat of absorption South-Western

Asia and Tibet and might be pushed to overrun all up to the whole frontier of India menacing her security and that of Western Asia with the possibility of an invasion and an overrunning and subjection by penetration or even by overwhelming military force to an unwanted ideology, political and social institutions and dominance of this militant mass of Communism whose push might easily prove irresistible.⁵²

At a time when India was officially applauding Red China and fraternising with her, it is remarkable that Sri Aurobindo should have so penetratingly foretold the probable configuration of things to come.

On 25 June 1950, North Korea — a Communist stronghold in Asia — crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea, whose President, Syngman Rhee, at once appealed to President Truman for help. When K. D. Sethna wanted Sri Aurobindo's guidelines for an article in *Mother India* on the Korean crisis, he wrote on 28 June:

The affair is as plain as a pikestaff. It is the first move in the Communist plan of campaign to dominate and take possession, first of these Northern parts and then of South-East Asia as a preliminary to their manoeuvres with regard to the rest of the continent — in passing Tibet, as a gate into India.

If they succeed, there is no reason why domination of the whole world should not follow by steps....

⁵² *The Ideal of Human Unity*, American Edition, pp. 12-3. In the Indian editions (including the International Centre of Education Collection, 1962, and the Birth Centenary Library), it appears at the end of the book as 'A Postscript Chapter'.

Truman seems to have understood the situation if we can judge from his moves in Korea, but it is to be seen whether he is strong enough to carry the matter through....

One thing is certain, that is, if there is too much shilly-shallying, and if America gives up now her defence of Korea, she may be driven to yield position after position until it is too late. At one point or another she will have to stand and face the necessity of drastic action even if it leads to war....

For the moment the situation is as grave as it can be.

As a matter of fact, Truman did indeed rise to the occasion, for he felt that "firmness would be the only way to deter new actions in other portions of the world"⁶³ Thus, after some initial reverses, General MacArthur was able to stem the tide of aggression and push the invader back.

Sri Aurobindo's letter was also published widely as a Message in August, and when the Chinese aggression in Tibet in the last days of October brought the menace much closer to India, Sethna wrote in *Mother India* (11 November 1950):

The basic significance of Mao's Tibetan adventure is to advance China's frontiers right down to India and stand poised there to strike at the right moment and with the right strategy.... With Tibet incorporated in China, we shall have Mao touching Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Assam.

According to Truman, our ambassador in China at the time, K. M. Panikkar, "had in the past played the game

⁶³ *Memoirs* by Harry S. Truman, Vol. II (Signet Edition), p. 386.

of the Chinese Communists fairly regularly",⁵⁴ and this too must have weakened India's stand in respect of Chinese moves in Tibet. In retrospect it is now clear that the "postscript chapter" as well as the letter of 28 June accurately assessed the strategic situation of Tibet as the gateway to India. When, years later, President Kennedy was shown a typed copy of Sri Aurobindo's statement, he is reported to have told Sudhir Ghose:

Surely, there is a typing mistake here. The date must have been 1960, not 1950! You mean to say that a man devoted to meditation and contemplation, sitting in one corner of India, said this about the intentions of Communist China as early as 1950? In 1942, Sri Aurobindo's firm and urgent advice that the Congress should accept and implement the Cripps Proposals was rejected, and the result was partition and a fissured and weakened India. In 1950, Sri Aurobindo's categorical warning about Chinese moves in Tibet and her intentions in Asia were ignored again, and the result was the Chinese invasion of India twelve years later. The wages of the sin of partition and of the ignorance of Sri Aurobindo's advice and warnings is the tragedy of Bangla Desh in 1971, the alignment of Pakistan and China against India, and the wreckage of our attempts at self-sufficiency and planned economic growth.⁵⁵

VII

Sri Aurobindo's preoccupations with national and international affairs, as indicated in the preceding Sections, should dispel the notion that he was something of a spiri-

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 413. ⁵⁵ Written in July 1971.

tual acrobat performing “miracles” and undergoing the most outlandish austerities and penances. In a life lived quintessentially “within”, the outer life could be disappointingly normal! He read, he wrote, he dictated, he talked, he laughed, he read proofs, he revised poems written by others, he gave interviews though only very occasionally. Even during the years of complete retirement after 1926, he received friends and savants like Tagore, Sylvain Levi, the poet Maurice Magre, M. Baron the Governor of Pondicherry, M. Schumann from Paris, C. R. Reddy, K. M. Munshi, and others. From behind the scenes, he helped the Mother whenever necessary with advice regarding the organisation and expansion of activities in the Ashram. The School, the printing press, the Golconde Guest House, the Dispensary, the Harpagon Workshop, the divers Services — in all activities the keynote of the work was the urge towards Perfection, which was spirituality in action. Golconde, for example, was a rare work of architectural beauty, and its daily ordering was a continual exercise in perfection. As a Guest House, it had (it still has) its own special rules, and in defence of these Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple on 25 February 1945:

As regards Golconde and its rules — they are not imposed elsewhere — there is a reason for them. ...First, the Mother believes in beauty as a part of spirituality and divine living; secondly, she believes that physical things have the Divine Consciousness underlying them as much as living things; and thirdly that they have an individuality of their own and ought to be properly treated.... It is on this basis that she planned the Golconde. First, she wanted a high architectural beauty, and in this she

succeeded... one spoke of it as the finest building of its kind he had seen, with no equal in all Europe or America... also she wanted all the objects in it, the rooms, the fitting, the furniture to be individually artistic and to form a harmonious whole... each thing was arranged to have its own use, for each thing there was a place, and there should be no mixing up, or confused or wrong use. ...That was why the rules were made.⁵⁶

The cardinal aim being the flowering of consciousness towards the Divine, the “rules” (if any) were but incidental, and freedom and the play of variety were of the essence of the Ashram life. Sri Aurobindo didn’t ever force on his disciples the limitations he had imposed on himself:

If I am living in my room, it is not out of a passion for solitude, and it would be ridiculous to put forward this purely external circumstance — or X’s withdrawnness which is a personal necessity of his sadhana — as if it were the obligatory sign of a high advance in the Yoga or solitude the aim; these are simply incidents which none are called upon to imitate.⁵⁷

Secluded and calm and reticent he might be, but his pulses responded every second to the multitudinous affairs of “dear and dogged” humanity. Along with the Mother, he was the spiritual director of the Ashram — of the seven hundred and fifty permanent *sādhaks* who constituted its complex and harmonious life in 1950. Albeit for the most part unseen, he was nevertheless the hub of the Ashram’s life and exerted an incommensurable

⁵⁶ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, pp. 612-3.

⁵⁷ Letter to Dilip, quoted in *Sri Aurobindo Prasange*, p. 92.

influence on the inner and outer life of the sadhaks. Sri Aurobindo's central direction was really a fruitful benevolence and an invisible infusion of occult force, and each individual sadhak and the aggregate too were the happier and the securer for this direction. There was no dull or dead uniformity or standardisation, for each sadhak was encouraged to grow in spirit, each in his own way, even as in a flower garden a variety of plants blossom, but each puts forth its own unique best in form, hue and perfume. As K. D. Sethna wrote editorially in *Mother India* (15 August 1949):

The Ashram in Pondicherry that has sprung up around him is a scene of multifarious activity, a field for a hundred talents and aptitudes — men of divers types developing by a series of inner Yogic experiences and the expression of those experiences in outer life. The Ashram is a glowing focus of India's innate spirituality, fraught with immense possibilities of irradiating the entire life of the nation. Some years later, an American visitor wrote:

The atmosphere of the Ashram is discouraging to all pretence and vanity. 'Ego-antics', so common in the average small group, are rarely noted here, even among a thousand — blessed relief! Surely there is here a powerful Force at work to subdue the Ego and bring forward the Soul.⁵⁸

The 'ego' is a stifling prison-house and makes for increasing anxiety, calculation and fear, but the Soul is seraphically free, and can sport in the Infinite with puissance and happiness. The sadhaks too have their moments of doubt and gloom — even their "dark nights" — but the great aim is inner poise and calm reflected in outer

⁵⁸ *Mother India*, March 1953, p. 57.

unhurried demeanour and joy in action. Free from the grip of economic values, the lure of the competitive rat-race of the outer world, and the insidious promptings of our too sordid human bondage, the sadhaks are not only enabled to live the *Gita's* ideal "Yoga is skill in works" (*Yogah karmasu kowsalam*), but even to exemplify the truth, "Yoga is joy in works". There was in Sri Aurobindo's relations with his disciples the admixture of the Divine and the human, and wisdom and humour played at cards for the awakening of enlightenment, the growth of consciousness, and the diffusion of happiness. His letters — as we have seen — could mingle instruction with humour, and make admonition itself a honeyed sweetness, as in this to Nirod:

You have the reputation of being a fierce and firebrand doctor who considers it a crime for patients to have illness. You may be right, but tradition demands that a doctor should be soft like butter, soothing like treacle, sweet like sugar and jolly like jam. So!

With the coming of the children, and the springing up of the School, the dormitories and the playgrounds, life in the Ashram was charged with a new sunniness and grew new dimensions of possibility, for the School aimed, not at manufacturing matriculates and graduates, but rather at creating conditions for the right and full flowering of personality. The idea of flowering — of the unfolding of the self petal by petal — is subtly reinforced by the abundance of flowers in the Ashram. While they contribute, no doubt, to the colour and beauty and aroma of the Ashram, they also play a very significant part in the sadhana itself. The ritual of the offering of flowers to the Mother is a potent symbolic act testifying

to the reality of the spiritual kinship between the Divine and the sadhaks. Once a French visitor, profoundly responding to this ministry of flowers, remarked:

Amongst all the offerings made to the Divine, the flower is the most subtle, and also the most mysterious; for, in its simplicity, it carries the vibrations of the *ākāśa*, the ethereal element itself, — that is, all that is most abstract, pure and perfect. It is, above everything else, the *form* behind which is the *sound*, the all-powerful creative *mantra*.⁵⁹

The offering of a flower, the receipt of a flower, could mean much, for flowers are verily the Divine's symbolic emanations of beauty and goodness and truth. Flowers in the Ashram have names of their own — not the names they are known by in the outside world, but Yogic names ('Psychological Perfection', 'Supreme descended on Earth', 'Divine Solicitude', 'Sincerity', 'Spiritual Healing', etc.) that insinuate their soul's power, their potentiality for spiritual engineering — and these angels and ministers of Grace in the Ashram agreeably mingle in the life-ways of the sadhaks, and make the Ashram something akin to a Garden of the unfolding Divine Manifestation.

After the passage of more than two decades, it is difficult today to convey in words the impression the Ashram made on a sensitive visitor during the late nineteen forties. The Ashram was spread over fewer buildings than now, the sadhaks were fewer, and Pondicherry itself, still a French Colony, lived at a more leisurely pace than now. One felt too that there was a great deal of truth in Professor Tan Yun-shan's remark that, not the

⁵⁹ See Lizelle's 'The Role of Flowers', translated from the French by Repton Preneuf, *Mother India*, February 1954, p. 14.

Ashram was in Pondicherry, no, Pondicherry was in the Ashram! And the Ashram's influence overflowed the main Ashram building in Rue de la Marine, overflowed the scattered houses where the sadhaks lived, overflowed Pondicherry and its environs too. As Sri Aurobindo admitted to a disciple:

Certainly, my force is not limited to the Ashram and its conditions... it is also used for individual purposes outside the scope of the Ashram and the practice of Yoga; but that of course is silently done and mainly by a spiritual action. The Ashram, however, remains at the centre of the work, and without the practice of Yoga the work would not exist and could not have any meaning or fruition.⁶⁰

The Ashram was the Ashram, a place selected by divine intention and sanctified for a great sacrificial work; and Sri Aurobindo's work, as Nolini explained, was "still of the nature of experiment and trial in very restricted limits, something in the nature of what is done in a laboratory when a new power has been discovered, but has still to be perfectly formulated in its process".⁶¹ But although inaccessible to most, Sri Aurobindo's influence was unmistakable, and even visitors felt that the very atmosphere of the place was charged with something ineluctable to which they could give no name. Whether one loitered among the trees and flowers in the Ashram, or sat by oneself in the cool and restful hours of the evening, or attended Anilbaran's, Purani's, Naren Banerji's, Dikshit's or Rishabhchand's instructive readings from Sri Aurobindo's works, or visited Dilip's house to catch the strains of Mira *bhajan*, or exchanged words or smiles

⁶⁰ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 277.

⁶¹ *The Yoga of Sri Aurobindo*, Part I, pp. 50-1.

with Nolini, Amrita, Rishabhchand, Pavitra, Prithwi Singh, Chandradip, Premanand, Gangadharam, or even if one merely watched the sadhaks at work — perhaps the rolling up or unrolling of mats at meditation time, or the culling and sorting out of flowers, or the washing and piling up of plates and cups, or conscientiously doing “gate duty” — one was apt to say echoing Horace, “And seek for Truth in the Ashram at Pondicherry”.⁶²

After a few days’ stay, one felt it would be a fair description of the Yoga-Ashram at Pondicherry to call it the first, faltering, none-the-less highly promising preliminary sketch of “a new Heaven and a new Earth”. Meeting the Mother — his own mother — after the lapse of almost thirty-five years on 21 November 1949, M. André felt that he was “still a small boy seeking safety in the mother’s lap”; and as for the Ashram, what struck him first was “the perfect harmony of the whole”; all details fitted together, all work was done “with an evident pleasure and not as a necessary duty”. After darshan on 24 November, he wrote that no words could describe “the overwhelming impression of benevolence, knowledge and strength” which radiated from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother:

It is not at all surprising that so many people undertake long journeys in order to have the privilege of paying their tribute of devotion. What they get in return is a glimpse of a higher and truer life which responds to the most innate aspiration of human nature.⁶³

The Mother gave darshan every day, and jointly with

⁶² *Atque inter silvas Academus* (And seek for truth in the garden of Academus).

⁶³ *The Advent*, November 1950, pp. 264-5.

Sri Aurobindo on the four darshan days. For the sadhaks and other seekers, darshan was always a moment of mystic union between Guru and disciple, breaking through the casements of Matter and Mind. For the rest, one read Sri Aurobindo's published works or unpublished correspondence, one read the Mother's *Conversations* or *Prayers and Meditations*, one joined the evening Meditation, one tried to lose oneself in "her finite's multitude in an infinite space".⁶¹ Or one tried to take in the argument of books like *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* and wondered whether the Possibility outlined therein was not being actually put into practice — though only on the scale of a miniature — in the rhythm of daily life in the Yoga-Ashram. The seven hundred and fifty inmates were drawn from different parts of India, with a noticeable sprinkling of Europeans and Americans as well; there were young people and there were old people, there were men, women, children; and there were poets, painters, musicians, retired civilians, ex-professors and ex-revolutionaries, physicians and surgeons, nurses and teachers, engineers and entrepreneurs, sadhus and ecstatics, and all, high and low, — there was really no 'high' and 'low' in the Ashram scale of values, — engaged themselves in some fruitful action or another according to the Mother's direction. And the Mother dealt differently with each person, — as Sri Aurobindo once explained to a disciple, — "according to his true need (not what he himself fancies to be his need) and his progress in the sadhana and his nature". In its outer organisation, the Ashram thus replaced the traditional sannyasi-ideal of alms-begging by purposive work, work offered as a sacrifice to the Divine; and at

⁶¹ *Savitri*, p. 76.

the same time, this arrangement delivered the sadhaks from all embarrassing preoccupations with money and the unending problem of bread-winning and the concomitant degradations and difficulties. The sadhaks were *one* in the Mother, and had put their *ādhara* at the disposal of the Mother; by losing themselves — and to the extent they lost themselves — in the consciousness of Sri Aurobindo and of the Mother (it was the same consciousness, in fact, being verily the Cosmic Consciousness), they experienced a liberation of the self and a soul's puissance and *ānanda* that admitted of no analysis or verbal description. In that ambience of freedom, all work ranked the same, all was the Divine's work, and all was done as a constant reaffirmation of the *saṅkalpa* of *atmasamarpaṇa*.

The stray responsive visitor to the Yoga-Ashram was thus sure to sniff at once the "atmosphere" of the place — its feeling for rhythm and its sense of harmony, its mellowed lights and its whispered sweetnesss, its enveloping peace and its contained puissances. The complicated wheels of the Ashram — as complicated as the processes and concerns of Nature — nevertheless revolved unseen, almost as effortlessly and unconsciously as in the seething world of Nature. The Ashram, one felt convinced, was the rough first sketch of the Promised Land — just a few dots and dashes and shapely curves and dance of colours — but even then one could discover in them the vague configurations, the confident commencement, of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. And one hoped, one prayed, one almost felt certain that the Promise would be at last redeemed in human time:

One man's perfection still can save the world.

There is won a new proximity to the skies,

A first betrothal of the Earth to Heaven,
 A deep concordat between Truth and Life:
 A camp of God is pitched in human time.⁶⁵

VIII

We have seen in an earlier chapter how, ever since Sri Aurobindo's departure from Calcutta in 1910, attempts were made from time to time to bring him back to active political life.⁶⁶ Lajpat Rai, Baptista, Moonje, C. R. Das were among the nationalist leaders who tried, at one time or another, to persuade Sri Aurobindo to return to India from his self-imposed exile and give a lead to the country. Invariably he excused himself. It wasn't likely that the Government would leave him free to pursue politics: it wasn't to be taken for granted that his views would be acceptable to the Nationalist party or the Indian National Congress: and, above all, his real work — the work that had brought him to Pondicherry — lay in a different sphere altogether. He had left politics not simply to evade arrest, or because he was seized by frustration regarding his innings in politics; he had come away because, as he told a disciple, he "got a very distinct *adesh* in the matter". The Divine had called him, he had obeyed the call! Nay more: he had found his "Cave of Tapasya" in Pondicherry, and there he would remain. And so firm was his resolution that he would not come out of his seclusion even to preside over the Ramakrishna Paramahansa centenary celebrations in 1936.

Although he had cut his connection with politics, once

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 603. ⁶⁶ Chapter XXII.

at the time of the Cripps mission (as mentioned earlier) he did intervene, but without leaving his Ashram. And he did employ a spiritual action on behalf of the Allies during the war. But, then, he looked upon the war as a *dharma yuddha*, and hence there was no politics so far as *he* was concerned. He was a Yogi burdened with *jñāna dr̥ṣṭi* or foreknowledge, Rishi endowed with plenary understanding, and now and then he offered advice when it was sought or when he thought the occasion demanded it. It is said that the foreign policy resolution passed at the Jaipur session of the Indian National Congress after the war was almost wholly, word for word, the draft sent by him to Nehru through Surendra Mohan Ghose.⁶⁷ The situation in India after the partition — the influx of refugees from Pakistan, the Kashmir imbroglio, subversion by the Communists — was hardly reassuring. Already people were getting a little disillusioned with the record of the Congress Governments in the States and at the Centre. When Nehru was in Calcutta early in 1949, "a bundle of leaflets was thrown into his car, demanding of him to bring Sri Aurobindo back to Bengal".⁶⁸ But deeply concerned though Sri Aurobindo was about happenings in Bengal and in India, he had no intention of returning to the political fray. Founding the Life Divine was an absorbing task enough, and tolerated no diversions.

But one thing was clear: boy, or adolescent youth, or teacher of literature, or lover of fair Bengal, or knight-errant of Indian nationalism, or servant of humanity, or torch-bearer of the Divine, Sri Aurobindo had travelled

⁶⁷ The disclosure was made by Surendra Mohan in a speech at Pondicherry, now published in *Mother India*, February 1971, p. 30.

⁶⁸ K. D. Sethna, *Mother India*, 15 August 1949.

far afield indeed, but only along the same road and always towards the same goal. As early as 1906, Brahma-bandhab Upadhyaya wrote in *Sandhya* about Sri Aurobindo:

Our Aurobindo is a rare phenomenon in the world. In him resides the *sāttvika* divine beauty, snow-white, resplendent. Great and vast — vast in the amplitude of his heart, great in the glory of his own self, his *swadharma* as a Hindu. So pure and complete a man — a fire-charged thunder yet tender and delicate as the lotus-leaf. A man rich in knowledge, self-lost in meditation. You can nowhere find his like in all the three worlds. In order to free the land from her chains, Aurobindo has broken through the glamour of Western civilisation, renounced all worldly comfort, and now as a Son of the Mother he has taken charge of the *Bande Mataram*. He is the Bhavananda, Jivananda, Dhirananda of Rishi Bankim, all in one.⁶⁹

This inspired piece of writing by an idealist-revolutionary was a homage wrung from the heart as well as a piece of prophetic divination. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo had always been inclined to ask: What did they know of love and service who only themselves loved or served? The centre of gravity that motivated action should be shifted further and further away from oneself, accomplishing wider and richer integrations all the time: "love not yourself, love Bengal, love India; serve not yourself, serve the Mother, the Mother and her three hundred million children; love India, serve her — liberate her, Mother India, Mother Bharati, Mother Durga, from the

⁶⁹ Translated by Tinkari Mitra (*Mother India*, December 1955, pp. 64-5).

clutches of the foreign Rakshasa, help her to live once more in freedom and regain her former glory"!⁷⁰ The tune was presently gathered into a symphony, and the music of this love embraced all humanity; and the Yoga was "not for ourselves alone, but for humanity".⁷¹ And there was a further deepening of vision and widening of horizons, the final and ultimate extension. Sri Aurobindo's Yoga was not for the sake of humanity; it was first, and last, and all the time only for the sake of the Divine. As the Mother explained:

It is not the welfare of humanity that we seek but the manifestation of the Divine. We are here to work out the Divine Will, more truly, to be worked upon by the Divine Will, so that we may be its instruments for the progressive incorporation of the Supreme and the establishment of His reign upon earth.⁷²

Sri Aurobindo, then, had always been forging ahead, the field of his action — first political, presently spiritual — had been broadening and growing ever new dimensions. At the near-culmination of his labours, he had now achieved what M. Jacques Maritain would have called a "universal integration", he had arrived at a total world-view that comprehended and transcended the earlier incomplete views. After almost a lifetime's ceaseless yearnings and arduous climbings on the steep stair of spirituality, Sri Aurobindo had won the beatific vision on the Pisgah heights of his own inveterate strivings. He had

⁷⁰ When Sir Akbar Hydari suggested that 'Durga' in *Bande Mataram* might be changed, Sri Aurobindo said by 'Durga' only the country 'India' was meant, not a Hindu Goddess. (*Mother India*, March 1971, p. 89.)

⁷¹ *The Yoga and its Objects* (1931), p. 5.

⁷² *Words of the Mother*, pp. 39-40.

caught the vision, and he had also found the clue to the process of the transformation of earth-nature into super-nature. But the vision was not a concrete embodied reality yet upon the earth; something had come down of the power and the glory, but not quite the thing itself, far less the whole of it. And so, still stationed in his room in the Ashram, he continued his Divine ministry pressing steadily towards the goal.

After independence, the political mart in India heard only stimulated battle-cries, and there was the deafening roar of loud opinion and propaganda. But Sri Aurobindo himself was like a star, he was indeed our Pole Star: or a lighthouse that shone through the mist and defied the cyclonic weather. On 29 October 1947, during the evening prayer meeting at Birla House in Delhi, Gandhiji praised a *bhajan* by Dilip, and added:

He (Dilip) has... retired from worldly life to practise Yoga at the feet of his great Guru, Rishi Aurobindo... at Sri Aurobindo Ashram there is no distinction of caste or creed. I heard this from the lips of the late Sri Akbar Hydari who... used to go there every year as on a pilgrimage.⁷³

The Ashram had truly become a Yogic place of pilgrimage for all India, and for the entire world; and 15 August began to have a double significance, as the birthday of free India, and as the birthday of the avatar of the Supramental Age. On his seventy-seventh birthday, as on earlier birthdays, there were offerings, salutations, celebrations. Disciples — Romen, Norman Dowsett, Dilip, Nishikanto — made song-offerings. Thus Nishikanto:

⁷³ Vide Dilip's article 'My Last Week with Gandhiji' in *Mother India*, 15 August 1949.

India's sacrificial fire
In your high self has found its shrine...
In this dim land you came to pave
The swift white path to liberty,
And the world its freedom shall attain
And kiss your feet in ecstasy....⁷⁴

Sethna wrote editorially in *Mother India*: "He (Sri Aurobindo) stands for the deepest and highest Independence, the freedom of the soul from the shackles of mortal ignorance, the liberation of the human into the Divine Consciousness".⁷⁵

On 16 August 1949, Sri Aurobindo Abirbhava Mahotsava was celebrated in Calcutta, and at the general conference, Justice N. C. Chatterjee said in the course of his masterly presidential address:

On this auspicious occasion India offers her humble salutation to Sri Aurobindo as the real up-lifter, the true path-finder, the prophet of Indian nationalism, the high-priest of Mother India, the maker of India's renaissance, the God-man who is sowing the seeds of immortality....

Free India today tragically suffers from disillusionment, a sense of frustration, a consciousness of settled disappointment and a progressive surrender to asuric forces working for her disintegration.... All eyes turn for light and guidance to the great Seer who by the unceasing sadhana of his life worked and struggled for India's liberation....

Of all places and provinces, Bengal, the land of

⁷⁴ *Mother India*, Special Number, 15 August 1949; translated from Bengali by Dilip.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

his birth, needs badly the magic thrill of his transforming touch....

Mass hunger, starvation, large-scale unemployment, the social disintegration caused by the migration of homeless and ruined refugees, the collapse of moral values, the steady loss of faith in the architects of our destiny have unhinged thinking humanity and there is a drift towards civil strife and chaos and anarchy....

Mr. Chatterjee thought that the leaders were paralysed by an "inner crisis" comparable to the impotence of anguish that overwhelmed Arjuna on the field of Kurukshetra. Freedom and democracy in "independent" India were imperilled by the "New Despotism", and by the prevalence of corruption, nepotism and injustice. Many tamely surrendered to the "crazy materialism recently preached by the West with vehement ruthlessness", but that way lay despair and the denial of the Soul of India. Perhaps, Sri Aurobindo — as Krishna awoke Arjuna's slumbering soul — perhaps Sri Aurobindo would call India's leaders to order, and one hoped they would hearken to him. Mr. Chatterjee concluded his address with the exhortation:

No foreigner sits like an incubus on the nation. It is now for the people to save themselves, to save the soul of the nation.

It is in the Spirit that Shakti is eternal, and if we can win back the inner Swaraj, we can win back the outer Empire. In the midst of depression and defeatism, listen to the Voice of Sri Aurobindo, who is the living embodiment of the creative flow of India's soul....

Almost a year later, his pupil of Baroda days, K. M.

Munshi — now a Cabinet Minister at the Centre — paid a visit to the Ashram on 9 July 1950, and met Sri Aurobindo after a lapse of more than forty years, and reminisced about it later:

I saw before me a being completely transformed, radiant, blissful, enveloped in an atmosphere of godlike calm. He spoke in a low, clear voice which stirred the depths of my being....⁷⁶

I saw in him, not my old professor, but something different. It was absolute integration of personality; attachment, wrath and fear in him had been transformed into a power which was at the same time beautiful and calm, the Central Idea in Aryan culture materialised in human shape. He seemed to say in his own language —

My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,
My body is God's happy living tool,
My spirit a vast Sun of deathless light.

Visitors who met Sri Aurobindo thus saw in him a Power, a Personality, but the Power, the Personality refused to be cribbed within the confines of familiar material categories. What could people possibly know — or hope to know — about so unique a spiritual phenomenon as Sri Aurobindo? Could a frail boat ever comprehend the ocean's wideness or depth? One might try to establish a semblance of intimacy with one or another of his many powers and personalities: the dreamer, the idealist, the poet — the scholar, the critic, the teacher — the patriot, the revolutionary, the priest of the Temple of Bhavani Bharati — the philosopher, the Master of Yoga, the architect of the Life Divine; but full comprehension eluded one's mental grasp, and one found it was

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, September 1952, p. 2.

far easier to feel awed, and to love and surrender.

A reference has been made earlier to Sri Aurobindo's speculations about 'The Perfection of the Body' and 'The Divine Body'. These were only "far-off speculations about what might become possible in the future evolution of it by means of a spiritual force".⁷⁷ The immediate object of Sri Aurobindo's endeavours was rather to realise the Divine and establish spiritual life on earth, but even for this the body could not be ignored. As he wrote in a letter dated 7 December 1949:

I put a value on the body first as an instrument, *dharmaśādhana*, or, more fully, as a centre of manifested personality in action, a basis of spiritual life and activity as of all life and activity upon the earth, but also because for me the body as well as the mind and life is a part of the Divine Whole, a form of the Spirit and therefore not to be disregarded or despised as something incurably gross and incapable of spiritual realisation or of spiritual use.⁷⁸

In another letter, written the very next day, he referred to Narayan Jyotishi, a Calcutta astrologer, who had made the prediction that Sri Aurobindo would prolong his life "by Yoga power for a very long period and arrive at a full old age", and added as if in corroboration: "In fact, I have got rid by Yogic pressure of a number of chronic maladies that had got settled in my body".⁷⁹ In other words, it appeared as though the length of his "life" would depend entirely on his own deliberate choice.

On the other hand, certain events that took place during 1949-50, although they did not perhaps attract any

⁷⁷ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 423.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 285. ⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 287.

special attention at the time, now seem to be invested with pointer-meanings. In August 1949, Henri Cartier Bresson, the world-famous French photographer on a visit to Pondicherry, was permitted by the Mother to make a number of portrait-studies of Sri Aurobindo — thus breaking a rule that had been strictly observed for about thirty-five years. Again, once when the Mother had told Sri Aurobindo that she felt like leaving her body, he is reported to have remarked, “No, this can never be. If necessary for this transformation, I might go; you will have to fulfil our Yoga of supramental descent and transformation”.⁸⁰ In his letter of 7 December 1949, Sri Aurobindo had explained why, unlike Sri Ramakrishna who wouldn’t use spiritual force for preserving the body, he was not unwilling to maintain the body “in good health and condition as an instrument or physical basis” for Yoga sadhana. In his reported conversation with the Mother, it is implied that it was open to the Mother as well as Sri Aurobindo to decide for themselves if, or when, they should leave the body, and if they wanted they could overcome physical ailments by means of spiritual force. And Sri Aurobindo was decided that, if one of them should go, it would be himself, not she.

Again, it was during 1950 that the composition of *Savitri* was done at a quickened pace. The whole of Book XI (‘The Book of Everlasting Day’) was dictated, as if in one long spell. “I want to finish *Savitri* soon”, Sri Aurobindo told Nirod one day, — but wherefore this seemingly sudden spurt of hurry? Having made his announcement, “he increased immensely the general tempo

⁸⁰ Reported by Dr. P. Sanyal in ‘A Call from Pondicherry’ (*Mother India*, December 1953, p. 187).

of composition and revision".⁸¹ But somehow, even when his attention was drawn to it, he seemed to defer to an indefinite "afterwards" the revision of 'The Book of Death' and the Epilogue ('The Return to Earth').

There were other strange and sinister indications too, straws in the wind perhaps, yet showing in what direction the wind was blowing. Soli Albless, for example, has made an important revelation:

On 15 August 1950, an old sadhak with a capacity for vision saw Sri Aurobindo drawing into himself dark fumes that were rising from the subconscious parts of the people as they were coming to him for *darśan* in a procession. He was gathering up the lower elements of earth-nature within the area of representative humanity and then drawing them into himself.⁸²

Was he negotiating a deal of transformation with the bleak — or black — Nadir of existence? Was he hewing a pathway to Light by tunnelling through Night? As he said in the sonnet 'The Pilgrim of the Night', written in 1938 and revised in 1944:

I made an assignation with the Night;

In the abyss was fixed our rendezvous:

In my breast carrying God's deathless light

I came her dark and dangerous heart to woo.⁸³

Another interesting circumstance was Surendra Mohan Ghose's consulting a Bhrigu astrologer in Delhi in October 1950. On being shown Sri Aurobindo's horoscope, the astrologer found the correct reference which tallied "exactly with Sri Aurobindo's life", and the astrologer concluded:

⁸¹ *Savitri*, Editor's Note, p. 817.

⁸² *Mother India*, February 1954, pp. 46-7. ⁸³ *Last Poems*, p. 5.

After 78 years,... he (Sri Aurobindo) will develop a *ghṛṇā* towards his body, and then he may leave his body; otherwise death is in his control. Of course, if a certain *yajña* or sacrifice could be performed, the catastrophe might still be averted. Surendra Mohan hurried to Pondicherry and told, first Nolini, and then the Mother who promptly spoke to Sri Aurobindo, about the Bhṛigu prediction. "Don't worry" was all that Sri Aurobindo said to Surendra Mohan. But on the Mother's suggestion, Surendra Mohan contacted the astrologer again and after some delay got a copy of the whole reading and sent it through a messenger to Pondicherry; but as things were to turn out, it was much effort to no purpose — the letter reached Nolini on 6 December 1950!⁸⁴

For days before 24 November 1950, Sri Aurobindo was ailing on account of the recurrence of a malady, uraemia, that had afflicted him earlier but soon retreated. From 17 November, the illness caused definite anxiety, yet the *darśan* on the 24th afternoon took place all the same, although a bit rushed through. Hardly any of the hundreds that filed past him and exposed themselves to the steady compassionate gaze of the Master had, however, the remotest suspicion that anything was wrong. On account of the annual School celebrations on 1 and 2 December, even the post-*darśan* days were filled with the excitement of preparation and anticipation. Some few nevertheless knew about Sri Aurobindo's illness, but this

⁸⁴ *Mother India*, March 1971, pp. 112-3. Sri Aurobindo didn't have much faith in Bhṛigu. In a letter written on 4 May 1936, he referred to the Bhṛigu Samhita as the "old dodge", and added: "Long ago I had a splendiferous Mussolinic-Napoleonic prediction of my future made to me on the strength of the same old mythological Bhṛigu!" (*Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 331.)

didn't affect the usual round of Ashram activities, and the Mother presided over the Playground events every evening. As Sri Aurobindo's illness continued to cause deep concern, on Nirod's suggestion the eminent surgeon, Dr. Sanyal, was summoned telegraphically from Calcutta, and he came on 30 November. On being told that Sanyal had arrived, Sri Aurobindo opened his eyes fully, smiled — "a smile serene and beautiful, it carried one to ecstasy, lighting the innermost corners of the heart" — and he placed his hand on Sanyal's head. When asked what the "trouble" was, Sri Aurobindo said simply: "Trouble? Nothing troubles me. And suffering? One can be above it." As for the specific difficulties, there was already much relief; he felt nothing! As he had hinted, Sri Aurobindo seemed to be "above" the circumstances, calm, detached, even indifferent! It was as though he wasn't interested in the disease and its progress or arrest. Then once the Mother spoke to Sanyal in the ante-room: "He is fully conscious within, but he is losing interest in himself". It was the well-beloved ever-faithful Champaklal who ventured to put the crucial question to the Master: "Are you not using your Force?" "No" came the ominous answer. But why? "If you don't use your Force, how is the disease to be cured?" interposed Nirod. "Can't explain", came the imperturbable reply, "you won't understand".⁸⁵

The School celebrations on 1 and 2 December had gone without a hitch. Only on the 3rd the Mother had failed to come to the playground, but although this was

⁸⁵ The reader is referred to K. D. Sethna's 'The Passing of Sri Aurobindo', Nirodbaran's 'Sri Aurobindo: "I am Here, I am Here"' and P. Sanyal's 'A Call from Pondicherry' for more detailed accounts of Sri Aurobindo's last illness.

noticed, it was not connected with Sri Aurobindo's illness, for very few knew about it. The battle between the illness ("uraemia", symbolic of the "Inconscience", according to Sethna) and the doctors (with their sophisticated medical knowledge and expertise and, above all, their boundless devotion to the Master) went on, the patient himself being neutral at best. On 4 December, Sri Aurobindo was helped out of his bed at his request; the distressing symptoms had "magically vanished", and he was able to walk to the arm-chair and take his seat. The disciples' eyes lighted up with joy, but it was after all to prove a false dawn. Late in the night of 4 December, it was clear Sri Aurobindo was withdrawing himself of set purpose. And at 1.26 a.m. on 5 December — with the Mother already in the room and the elect few watching — the Light seemed to flicker, the Light seemed to fade out:

A voyager upon uncharted routes
Fronting the viewless danger of the Unknown,
Adventuring across enormous realms,
He broke into another Space and Time.⁸⁶

But for the millions awake on the morning of 5 December, it was as though they had been orphaned of a sudden; and the event overwhelmed many of them as a mystic holocaust that was both an end and a beginning:

It is finished, the dread mysterious sacrifice,
Offered by God's martyred body for the world...
He who has found his identity with God
Pays with the body's death his soul's vast light.
His knowledge immortal triumphs by his death.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ *Savitri*, pp. 103-4.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 504-5. The last three lines were one of the three passages

IX

Two hours after Sri Aurobindo's passing, the Mother announced the news to the Ashram inmates at 3.30 a.m. on 5 December. The news spread quickly, and was flashed at once all over the world. Sri Aurobindo's body was to lie in state till noon, and the Ashram gates were to be thrown open to enable all to pay their homage to the Mahayogi.

While Pondicherry was stunned by the news, the sadhaks were overwhelmed by a sudden sense of desolation. It was as though a fathomless zero was flung across the world.

Leaders and savants who had known Sri Aurobindo and those who had only followed his career from a distance or had merely read his works, all were equally shaken by the news that came over the air in the morning. The President of India, Rajendra Prasad, said in the course of the statement that he issued: "India will worship and enshrine his memory and place him in the pantheon of its greatest seers and prophets". The Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, referred to Sri Aurobindo's "astonishing brilliance of mind" and described him as "one of the greatest minds of our generation". The news took Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's mind to the "very beginnings of our struggle for freedom". Dr. C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar saw in Sri Aurobindo's spiritual life "a reduplication of the quest and the asceticism of the Buddha and other apostles of humanity". Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, then India's ambassador in Russia, described Sri Aurobindo as "the greatest intellectual of our age and a major force

dictated last by Sri Aurobindo as additions to *Savitri*. The autobiographical slant is unmistakable.

for the life of the spirit". Numberless were such tributes, and they had the ring of spontaneity; many were wrung from the heart, many emanated from a genuine appreciation of the poet, the patriot, the philosopher, or the great sage of Pondicherry.

Sri Aurobindo's disciples and close associates, of course, could hardly recover from the impact of the event and formulate their reactions. For instance, S. Doraiswami Aiyar could merely say: "I have been shaken out of my foundations to grasp the significance of what is apparently the greatest tragedy to humanity at this critical juncture in its history". Dr. R. Vaidyanathaswami remarked that "to the devotees and sadhaks, in the Ashram and outside it, he had been their Rock of Refuge, and the world without him would lose its brightness".

An English disciple, Morwenna Donnelly, recorded in great anguish of spirit:

Faced by this event, I felt that for the first time I could understand a little of that desolation of spirit which the followers of Jesus must have endured between the terrible Friday and the evening of the 'first day of the week'.

Jesus had warned his followers that his Kingdom was not of the earth, and Sri Aurobindo too had often warned his disciples not to visualise the promised Supramental descent in their own convenient mental terms. What Jesus had said to "doubting Thomas" was pertinent still: *Be not faithless but believing!*

Some disciples who were poets as well were able to invoke out of the fiery ordeal of their agony itself the "marvel bird" of ever-living love and gratitude and hope. Thus one of them, the Ceylonese-born J. Vijayatunga:

Are we sad today? Is the earth dark without light?
Nay, Master, Thou didst not live in vain
Thy life sublime and austere was not spent
For nought.... Holding to the hem
Of Thy garment we shall raise ourselves
To High Heaven, by Thy Grace, if not now
In some distant age, and once again
We shall behold Thee, O Master,
Shining with ever greater lustre, shining
Like the Sun, but unafraid we shall reach Thee
And touch Thee, and be burnt in the Fire
Of Thy love.

Sri Aurobindo's body covered in spotless white silk was laid in state on a cot, itself covered in pure white, by 5 a.m. in the room he had occupied for over 23 years. A painting of the Buddha from Ajanta adorned the eastern wall, and the whole room was strewn with flowers. The Ashram inmates had darshan first, between five and six; then the people of Pondicherry and others who had come from outside filed past silently and in the most orderly manner possible and paid their respects to the almost mythical Person who had made Pondicherry his home for a period of forty years.

Although it was intended at first that the body should be interred in the Ashram compound in the afternoon, the preparations were suddenly stopped, and late in the evening an announcement was made conveying the decision to postpone the interment:

The funeral of Sri Aurobindo has not taken place today. His body is charged with such a concentration of Supramental light that there is no sign of decomposition and the body will be kept lying on his bed so long as it remains intact.

By evening over 60,000 people, young and old, had queued past the sublime Master — their eyes dimmed with tears and their visible grief one with the spontaneous and solemn silence. For everyone — for almost everyone of the sixty thousand — it was a unique moment, a moment abstracted out of the stream of time when eternity was made out of the moment. Each took the burden of his (or her) own personality, carried his own inner climate of the soul; and the figure of the Purusha lying in the *ananta-sayanam* posture affected each a little differently perhaps, yet it was also on the whole a cleansing, cathartic and chastening experience for most.

One of the inmates, Dara (Aga Syed Ibrahim), had a singular experience that morning when he walked past Sri Aurobindo's body lying on the cot in its snow-white background:

I found myself in Sri Aurobindo's own room by the side of his cot. He seemed so peaceful and happy, and the flesh shone with a new lustre which I had failed to see at the *darśan* time on 24th November. Why could I not see it before?... I could not take my eyes off his face and arms. It seemed to me he was alive. It was certain that he was in a condition of deep and upward soaring trance just then.⁸⁸

Many others too had similar experiences. Between 1.30 a.m. and 7.30 p.m. was a stretch of eighteen hours, yet Sri Aurobindo's body had not only not shown any signs of decomposition, it had actually acquired a new lustre and the radiant complexion of life! Death, where is thy sting? Whose then, is the Victory?

⁸⁸ 'My Last Darshan of Sri Aurobindo' (*Mother India*, 21 February 1951).

The Mother described the new lustre as the Supramental light, and helped Dr. Sanyal also — who at first couldn't — to see it: "a luminous mantle of bluish golden hue around him". And Sethna's portrait has almost an epiphanic quality: "Spiritually imperial — this is the only description fitting the appearance of the body.... The atmosphere of the room was vibrant with a sacred power to cleanse and illumine, a power which appeared to emanate from the Master's poise of conquering rest and to invade the bodies of all the watchers... as if... there came pouring down to humanity the life-transcending grace of the Supermind". On the 6th, more and more pilgrims — including M. André Menard, the Commissioner for French Settlements in India — had *darsan* of the miracle of the living God in a lifeless body! It was not simply the delay in the body's decomposition; this was a superb positive leap of revelation as well, the glow of the Golden Purusha in majestic repose.

It was noteworthy that Sri Aurobindo's passing moved deeply all sections of the community throughout India. Officials and ministers of the French India Government and of the Government of India in Pondicherry were among those who paid their homage to the departed Seer. Floral wreaths on behalf of the President of India and the Prime Minister were placed before Sri Aurobindo. Telegrams from all corners of the world poured in continually, and letters and messages piled up in heaps. In West Bengal, a Government resolution described Sri Aurobindo as "the greatest Bengali Seer and savant of recent times", and as a mark of respect to him all Government offices, courts and educational institutions were ordered to remain closed for a day. In Bombay, the share market, the bullion market, and other markets

and many institutions were closed on the fifth, and in Kanpur, Banaras, and many other centres too there were similar closures as a mark of respect to the great patriot who had become a Pilgrim of Eternity.

The press everywhere gave wide coverage to the event, and there were well-informed as well as appreciative editorial tributes in most papers. Among the best of these was the *Hindu* leading article on 6 December:

The news of the sudden passing of Sri Aurobindo will be received with profound sorrow throughout the civilised world. In an age of rampant materialism incorruptible witnesses to the supremacy of the spirit are none too many.... The seer of Pondicherry acknowledged no limits to man's capacity to realise the divine in himself, no inhibitions that might militate against the harmony that alone could establish the rule of righteousness on earth. He spoke with no provincial accent, nor did he make dogmatic assertions that might have had the effect of repelling open minds. His was a universal message and his marvellous mastery of the written word helped to secure for it a respectful hearing across the barriers of race and language. For Aurobindo the prophet the unity of the human family in the Divine consciousness was not merely a matter of faith, it was a goal to be realised.

A shining page in our history records his heroic part in the struggle for Indian freedom. Nurtured on the English poets, his ardent nature rallied early to the call of patriotism, spurning a life of elegant ease. He brought to public life a burning eloquence, a power of idealism and a dynamic leadership which roused the land from end to end and destroyed that

passive consent which had been the charter of imperialism....

...it must be confessed that the very subtlety of his speculation and the dazzling opulence of its expression often combine to put off all except the most hardy intellect and the most persevering will; nor should it be forgotten that a philosophy that bases itself on the integral apprehension of truth cannot be understood merely with the discursive intellect. In insisting that philosophy is not merely ideas that are talked about but experience that transforms, Sri Aurobindo was in accord with age-long Indian tradition.... Sri Aurobindo taught a doctrine which may be correctly regarded as not a negation but an amplification of India's immemorial teaching. And generations to come will honour his memory as that of a great path-finder in the realm of the spirit.

On the 7th morning the Mother issued a statement that was prayer and benediction both:

Lord, this morning Thou hast given me the assurance that Thou wouldst stay with us until Thy work is achieved, not only as a consciousness which guides and illumines but also as a dynamic Presence in action. In unmistakable terms Thou hast promised that all of Thyself would remain here and not leave the earth atmosphere until earth is transformed. Grant that we may be worthy of this presence and that henceforth everything in us be concentrated to the fulfilment of Thy sublime work.

At 8 a.m. the same day, Dr. Sanyal and two other physicians examined Sri Aurobindo's body 54 hours after life had become extinct, and declared that the body was still

intact showing no signs of decomposition. This was certified also by Dr. Barbet, the Chief Medical Officer of French India. Such of Sri Aurobindo's disciples and admirers that had come from outside — by car, train or plane — were permitted to have *darśan*, but the inmates and the local people who had already had *darśan* on the 5th or the 6th were excluded. This policy of selective *darśan* was enforced on the 8th also.

For over three days Sri Aurobindo's body had remained intact: the golden tint had persisted: the eyes closed serenely had yet radiated the Greater Life, not the extinction of life. Might it not be that Sri Aurobindo intended to return to the body? On the 8th December, the Mother asked Sri Aurobindo in their occult meeting place to resuscitate, to return to life, but he answered, according to her testimony: "I have left this body purposely. I will not take it back. I shall manifest again in the first Supramental body built in the Supramental way". That seemed to be final; "the lack of receptivity of the earth and men", said the Mother on the 8th, "is mostly responsible for the decision Sri Aurobindo has taken regarding the body":

Hard is it to persuade earth-nature's change:

Mortality bears ill the eternal's touch...⁹⁹

But the world-redeemer must redeem the world even in spite of the world, in spite of recalcitrant humanity:

The poison of the world has stained his throat...

He dies that the world may be new-born and live.¹⁰⁰

On the 9th morning, after over 100 hours of Supramental sustenance, the first signs of decomposition were noticed at last, and it was decided to inter the body in the evening. The body was placed in a gleaming rose-

⁹⁹ *Savitri*, p. 10. ¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 506.

wood coffin made under Udar Pinto's directions in the Ashram Harpagon Workshop. The box was lined with silver and satin, with a velvet cushion at the bottom. Sri Aurobindo's body was covered with a gold-embroidered cloth, and after India's Consul-General in French India, R. K. Tandon, had offered his homage, Champaklal covered his beloved Father's face with a piece of white cloth, and the lid carrying Sri Aurobindo's symbol of the two intersecting triangles with the pool and lotus at the centre,⁹¹ all in gold, was screwed on the coffin. It was then carried by the sadhaks and laid in the cement concreted vault made ready in the Ashram courtyard under the "service tree", first planted in 1930, with its now wide-ranging multiple-branches, covering almost the whole place and giving abundant shade and raining protective grace. The coffin was placed in such a way that Sri Aurobindo's head might still be turned to the east, and concrete slabs soon covered the vault. Floral wreaths were placed, and sadhaks — first Champaklal, then Nolini, then the rest — placed potfuls of earth on the covered vault. There was nothing credal or sectarian about the ceremony. Not a word was spoken, there were no audible hymns or prayers, and no rites that indicated adhesion to any particular religion. The enveloping silence was, however, more eloquent and more profound than all the funeral orations of the world. The scene, with the sun slowly setting, was ineluctably symbolic of the happenings.

⁹¹ In Sri Aurobindo's symbol, the descending triangle represents Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence—Conscious-Force—Bliss); the ascending triangle stands for the aspiration from the lower material existence under the form of Life—Light—Love. The junction of both (the central square) is the Manifestation—the pool is multiplicity or creation and the Lotus at the centre is the Avatar of the Supreme.

The Mother in her great silent strength of suffering watched the solemn proceedings from upstairs, through a window overlooking the courtyard. Now that her spiritual comrade and Divine co-worker of over thirty-five years had chosen to withdraw from the scene, who could weigh the Atlas weight of responsibility that now lay on her shoulders? But, then, didn't Sri Aurobindo anticipate it all — and forewarn all — when he dictated just a few weeks before his passing:

A vast intention has brought two souls close

And love and death conspire towards one great end?⁹²

Death, so-called "death", was "a beginning of greater life". Who could say what the Divine intention was — what was "God's secret plan"? Alone, alone, seemingly alone in her immaculate solitariness, alone in earth's transforming hour, alone when the "soul of the world that is Satyavan" is held to ransom by the Asuric hordes of the dark, the hideous spectres of a possible nuclear war, what was to be the Mother's role in the context of December 1950? Again, hadn't Sri Aurobindo divined and even created her predicament and also prescribed her course of action in the great passage in *Savitri* dictated almost as the last thing he did as a poet with the vision and the voice Divine:

As a star, unaccompanied, moves in heaven

Unastonished by the immensities of space,

Travelling infinity by its own light,

The great are strongest when they stand alone...

A day may come when she must stand unhelped

On a dangerous brink of the world's doom and hers,

Carrying the world's future on her lonely breast,

Carrying the human hope in a heart left sole

⁹² *Savitri*, p. 520.

To conquer or fail on a last desperate verge.
 Alone with death and close to extinction's edge,
 Her single greatness in that last dire scene,
 She must cross alone a perilous bridge in Time
 And reach an apex of world-destiny
 Where all is won or all is lost for man...
 For this the silent Force came missioned down;
 In her the conscious Will took human shape:
 She only can save herself and save the world.⁹³

At last, "immobile in herself", the Mother gathered force, and gave the world the *mantra* of renewal, the Mother's hymn of gratitude to the Master in the name and on behalf of all the world and all humanity:

To THEE who hast been the material envelope
 of our Master, to THEE our infinite gratitude.
 Before THEE who hast done so much for us, who
 hast worked, struggled, suffered, hoped, endured so
 much, before THEE who hast willed all, attempted
 all, prepared, achieved all for us, before THEE we
 bow down and implore that we may never forget,
 even for a moment, all we owe to THEE.

For days and weeks following, Sri Aurobindo's closest disciples and most devoted admirers continued to speculate regarding the meaning of the mystic holocaust or self-immolation — if such it was. The retention by the body of its natural complexion — if anything the Golden Purusha only more golden — and of its natural tight organic formation puzzled many, not least the medical men. Was it not a reversal of Nature's Law that Sri Aurobindo's body — under tropical conditions too, and without the induction of drugs or special conditions — should have defied decomposition for over 100 hours,

⁹³ *ibid.*, pp. 521-2.

and reposed "in a grandeur of victorious quiet, with thousands upon thousands having *darśan* of it?"⁹⁴ Neither everyday experience nor medical science would give even half that much time as the outside limit for a body in the tropics to resist decomposition after death. And then, — the sustained glow, the supernal calm, the gracious mien! Did all that drama of immitigable death and radiant transcendence mean nothing? Was it no more than — at best — a freak of nature?

"Withdrawal, the great withdrawal!", they said — but hadn't Sri Aurobindo's life been a whole series of withdrawals? While yet young in years, he was withdrawn from his home to the residential school at Darjeeling, and then from India to England. Having qualified for the I. C. S. (the "heaven-born" Service), he manoeuvred to withdraw from it; having risen high in the Baroda Service and become Acting Principal of the Baroda College, he withdrew from that prison of affluent security and plunged into the maelstrom of politics and revolution; at the height of his influence after Surat, he withdrew to a quietude of Nirvanic calm in a small room in Baroda — then Narayana withdrew him to the Alipur jail so that he could continue his *sādhana* — and still later Sri Aurobindo withdrew from politics altogether and proceeded from Calcutta to Chandernagore, and from Chandernagore to Pondicherry; and there, having won height after height of realisation and accomplished the God's Labour of the *Arya*, he withdrew to complete silence on 24 November 1926; and now, in December 1950, this climactic withdrawal from the body itself! Weren't the several withdrawals so many strategic retreats that were really purposive forced marches, each "with-

⁹⁴ K. D. Sethna, *The Passing of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 5.

drawal" merely signifying that one more phase of his campaign of conquest was over and another, in another but related field, had begun? Why, then, regret the "great withdrawal" of 5 December 1950?

Or one reviewed Sri Aurobindo's divers roles on the terrestrial stage: a Kacha mastering an alien lore in England but rejecting the blandishments of Devayani; a young Augustus at Baroda, imposing his empire on the "realms of gold"; a Perseus or Prometheus of 'Bhavani Mandir'; an Arjuna surrendered to Krishna at Alipur; a Vyasa doing a neo-*Mahabharata* in the *Arya*; a neo-Vishvamitra giving us a new Gayatri in *The Mother*; a Yogishwara Krishna doubled with a Yogishwara Shiva playing an invisible hand in world happenings; and on 5 December 1950, "the Last Great Act of drawing off the 'halahala' that his own Mahakala action had precipitated out of the cosmic ferment".⁹⁵

Or one tried to find solace in the classical symbol of the seed dying to give life to plant or tree. The whole rhythm of existence upon earth—life and birth and growth and death was a mystery. And the greatest mystery at the heart of phenomenal life was the miracle of resurrection following the shock of the crucifixion. Nolini Kanta Gupta said some time after the event:

He (Sri Aurobindo) has done it: he has made Nature take the final leap. The mental being with its triple nodi is at last bundled up and cast into the Supramental status. As he saw and assured us,
A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous
hour...

⁹⁵ Chimanbhai D. Patel's talk on 'What Sri Aurobindo Stands For' at Bangalore on 5 February 1967 (*Mother India*, August 1967, pp. 435-6).

Nature shall overleap her mortal step —
 the formed seed is now in the womb developing
 fast and sure, it awaits the moment to break out
 into the light of material and universal day.⁹⁶

There was a “death” certainly, and there was a phenomenon surpassing our notions of “death”. The death was unnecessary because, had Sri Aurobindo been willing to use his Yogic force as he had done on former occasions, the “disease” couldn’t have made headway and prove mortal. Not age, not disease, not just these; death was suffered, it was almost invited. But why? There must have been a capital reason; not a personal reason, but a cosmic reason — what was it? What was it Sri Aurobindo hoped to achieve — or avert — by making his tremendous as-signment with the Night?

Since coming to Pondicherry, the whole aim of Sri Aurobindo’s Yoga was to bring the Supermind here into our world, and make it a part of the earth-consciousness, as ‘Life’ and ‘Mind’ already are. When, during his interview on 4 February 1943, Dilip asked Sri Aurobindo, “Is your real work this invocation of the Supramental?”, the Master answered very simply, “*Yes, I have come for that*”.⁹⁷ If *that* was the cardinal purpose of Sri Aurobindo’s avatarhood and ministry on earth, anything he did — including his “self-immolation” — must have had a close connection with that fundamental objective. Even in 1938, the Mother used to see the Supermind descending into Sri Aurobindo, but it couldn’t be settled for good in the earth-consciousness, especially in the physical or the physical mind. In the series of articles included in *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*, Sri Aurobindo in-

⁹⁶ *Mother India*, February 21, 1951.

⁹⁷ *Among the Great* (Jaico Edition), p. 359.

troduced, as we have seen earlier, the “realm between” — the Mind of Light — a limited or delegated power of the Supermind; and we have the Mother’s word — reinforced by the experience of the Supramental radiance from his body from 5th to 8th December — that “as soon as Sri Aurobindo withdrew from his body, what he called the Mind of Light got realised here”. Was it, perhaps, necessary for Sri Aurobindo to receive the full force of the Supermind in the physical, retain it for a few days, so that the way might be cleared for the ultimate Supramentalisation of the earth and man?

It is the mark of the ‘gentleman’ that he would suffer himself, rather than inflict pain on others or even see them suffer. According to Nirod, Sri Aurobindo was a “Supramental perfect gentleman”, and had a magnanimity of the kind described in the lines —

A magnanimity as of sea or sky

Enveloped with its greatness all that came.

And it is of Shiva most that Sri Aurobindo reminded Nirod!⁹⁸ And Yogiswara Shiva, what was his role in world-existence:

A dreadful cord of sympathy can tie

All suffering into his single grief and make

All agony in all the worlds his own...

The poison of the world has stained his throat.⁹⁹

If he could himself invite and absorb — even at the cost of surrendering the material envelope that was his body — the first full impact of the Supramental descent (as Shiva received the impact of Ganga cascading in a downpour on the earth), both to make sure of the

⁹⁸ Talk on ‘Sri Aurobindo—Perfect Gentleman’ on 12 June 1971 (*Mother India*, August 1970, p. 413).

⁹⁹ *Savitri*, p. 506.

descent and to contain and consolidate the gains for the world, why, certainly he would do it — as Shiva drank the poison and yet contained it in his throat! If the victory could be won somewhere somewhen by somebody, it would become possible ultimately for anybody to win it anywhere. To open the Possibility was the main thing. And the sacrifice of his body, as the first physical base for the demonstration of the Supramental possibility — if that could advance the date of the total descent of the Supramental light, or ensure the near descent — well, the sacrifice was worth making. Since, after all, even without his physical presence, he would be *here*, one with the Mother's consciousness and power, he could also accelerate, witness and participate in the decreed Divine manifestation upon earth.

"A meditative silence reigned in the Ashram for twelve days after the passing of the beloved Master", writes Rishabhchand; "then the normal activities began, but with a striking difference. One felt a pervading Presence in the Ashram atmosphere...."¹⁰⁰ On 14 December the Mother half-admonished the sadhaks: "To grieve is an insult to Sri Aurobindo who is here with us, conscious and alive". And on 18 January 1951, she gave a firmer assurance still:

We stand in the Presence of Him who has sacrificed his physical life in order to help more fully his work of transformation.

He is always with us, aware of what we are doing, of all our thoughts, of all our feelings and all our actions.

The Samadhi itself, visited daily by hundreds in an attitude of devotion and prayer, seemed to testify to the

¹⁰⁰ *Mother India*, February 1955, p. 12.

reality of Sri Aurobindo's continued Presence, bathed in the life-giving rays of the Everlasting Day. In Nirodbaran's inspired language:

Out of his Samadhi, a thousand flames seem to be mounting up and, lodged in our soul, burning in an ever rejuvenating fire, while His Presence enveloping and merging with and radiating from the Mother's being and body is pervading the whole atmosphere. One can see His Presence, hear his footfalls, his rhythmic voice, ever vigilant, devoid of the encumbrance of the physical body.¹⁰¹

Still Nirod hears the Master's whisper, "*I am here, I am here*", and with the ear of faith *we* can hear the words too.

The mystic realisation of his presence in our midst — for his nectarean presence and beneficence is not confined to the Samadhi environs or even the Ashram alone — is the Promise of preservation, liberation and transformation to humanity poised perilously on the edge of the precipice: the deep Abyss on one side, the steep ascent to Truth on the other. In this phoenix hour the hour of the unexpected, when the Asuric and Divine forces are fighting the battle of man's future — the battle of Satyavan the Soul of the World — Sri Aurobindo gives us the all-sufficing Word that his coming will not have been in vain, that his ministry, "Sri Aurobindo's Action", is as pauseless and potent as ever.

Come, O Creator Spirit, come,
And make within our hearts thy home;
To us thy grace celestial give,
Who of thy breathing move and love.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Sri Aurobindo: 'I am here, I am here'*, p. 24.

¹⁰² Stephen Langton's *Sequence in Mass of Pentecost*, translated by Robert Bridges.

EPILOGUE

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SRI AUROBINDO'S ACTION

I

Admirers of Sri Aurobindo the world over, when they had got over the first shock of the news broadcast on 5 December 1950, could hardly avoid asking the two inter-related questions: "Now what will happen to us? And what will happen to the Ashram?" Voicing the feelings of tens of thousands, A. R. Ponnuswami Iyer wrote:

His (Sri Aurobindo's) departure has left a void in the hearts of thousands, a wide gaping void in their life. He was the light on their path, their infallible guide and unfailing protector. His mission on earth, unlike Sankara's, was not to teach a doctrine, unlike Sri Ramana Maharshi's, not to give a mere direction, but to lead and carry humanity to its goal.¹ It followed that Sri Aurobindo, albeit screened from their view, must still be "ready with his help, guidance and protection". Wasn't there the *samādhi* in the Ashram compound? People flocked to it, pressed their heads on it with the deepest abandonment of reverence, or sat for hours close by in silent meditation. What did they gain? What did they hope for? The *samādhi*, of course, is much more than a tomb containing the "mortal remains". In Madhav Pandit's words (though spoken years later):

The *samādhi* is the physical concentration of the consciousness that Sri Aurobindo embodied in his material body.... It is a living reservoir of spiritual

¹ *Sunday Times* (Madras), Sri Aurobindo Memorial Number, 17 December 1950.

consciousness and force, emanating its vibrations incessantly.... Whatever the seeking the sanction goes forth.”

To sadhaks and admirers with the eyes and ears of faith, the Master seemed to say, “I am here, I am here”, not in the vicinity of the samadhi alone, but elsewhere in the Ashram too, and indeed wherever the need was urgently felt, or the heart beat furiously for the Divine response. When the call or cry went forth, there was the unmistakable instantaneous answer and presence as well.

Again, in the *Sunday Times* of 17 December 1950, there appeared the report of a conversation between a visitor (Kumar) and a senior sadhak (T. V. Kapali Sastry). When the former asked, “With the passing of Sri Aurobindo, what will be the future of the Ashram, of the sadhana...”, he was checked by Sastry with a twitching of his eyebrows:

Passing, passing... who passed away and where?... The Master of Integral Yoga is here, as intensely and concretely as ever.... Yes, those that have been looking up to him for guidance and aid in Yoga have not felt him gone, have not felt themselves orphaned, have not felt a void, though, of course, the physical pangs of separation are there.... The Ashram will go on as before and so also the sadhana.

But doubting Thomas still wondered whether, in the physical absence of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother could command that amount of loyalty and devotion that Sri Aurobindo had attracted. After some minutes of silence, Kapali Sastry said:

The Master and the Mother are not different and

separate.... She is the manifested, dynamic part of his soul... it is the Mother who has been acting, not only as the executive head of the Ashram, but also as the unfailing and ever-watchful guide, drawing all the power and light from Sri Aurobindo and passing them on to hundreds of sadhaks in hundreds of ways, all according to each one's needs. Nor was Kapali Sastry's by any means a sudden affirmation; it had grown over a period of years as an article of faith among the sadhaks. There is, after all, but *one* Consciousness — the Divine Consciousness. And two such divine collaborators like Sri Aurobindo and the Mother — the collaboration began in 1914, entered a new active phase in 1920, and a still closer creative phase in 1926 — could operate effectively only if their consciousness-force were intimately grounded on the Divine so as to be practically indistinguishable. There was, no doubt, the only too human tendency on the part of some to differentiate, compare or contrast the two by applying absurdly mental criteria, but Sri Aurobindo repeatedly warned his disciples against such inane or facile exercises. For example, he wrote to a disciple on 10 September 1931:

There is no difference between the Mother's path and mine; we have and always had the same path, the path that leads to the supramental change and the divine realisation; not only at the end, but from the very beginning they have been the same.³

Again, on 13 November 1934:

The opposition between the Mother's consciousness and my consciousness was an invention of the old days.... The Mother's consciousness and mine are the same, the one Divine Consciousness in two, because

³ *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*, p. 363.

that is necessary for the play. Nothing can be done without her knowledge and force, without her consciousness — if anybody really feels her consciousness, he should know that I am there behind it and if he feels me it is the same with hers.

Two years later he wrote: "Whatever one gets from the Mother, comes from myself also — there is no difference".⁴ It was natural at the beginning to view persons — even two such as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother — in terms of sharp separativity. It was partly Sri Aurobindo's declaration, but even more the sadhaks' own experience and realisation, that gradually laid the foundations of the faith on which the edifice of the Ashram — with its multiple mansions — came to be reared. Soon after his complete withdrawal on 24 November 1926, Sri Aurobindo had written his great little book, *The Mother*, and while describing the Divine Shakti's four chief powers and personalities, he had incidentally also brought out the Mother's own marvellous and many-sided ministry. It was, perhaps, the inspired portraiture of Mahasaraswati — a prose-poem charged with mantric power — that came nearest to the sadhaks' daily and progressive understanding of the Mother's movements and ministrations:

Mahasaraswati is the Mother's Power of work and her spirit of perfection and order. The youngest of the Four, she is the most skilful in executive faculty and the nearest to physical Nature. Maheshwari lays down the large lines of the world-forces, Mahakali drives their energy and impetus, Mahalakshmi discovers the rhythms and measures, but Mahasaraswati presides over their detail of organisation and execution, relation of parts and effective combination of

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 361, 363.

forces and unfailing exactitude of result and fulfilment. The science and craft and technique of things are Mahasaraswati's province. Always she holds in her nature and can give to those whom she has chosen the intimate and precise knowledge, the subtlety and patience, the accuracy of intuitive mind and conscious hand and discerning eye of the perfect worker. This Power is the strong, the tireless, the careful and efficient builder, organiser, administrator, technician, artisan and classifier of the worlds. When she takes up the transformation and new-building of the nature, her action is laborious and minute and often seems to our impatience slow and interminable, but it is persistent, integral and flawless. For the will in her works is scrupulous, unsleeping, indefatigable.... Nothing is too small or apparently trivial for her attention; nothing however impalpable or disguised or latent can escape her. Moulding and remoulding she labours each part till it has attained its true form, is put in its exact place and fulfils its precise purpose. In her constant and diligent rearrangement of things her eye is on all needs at once and the way to meet them and her intuition knows what is to be chosen and what rejected and successfully determines the right instrument, the right time, the right conditions and the right process. Carelessness and negligence and indolence she abhors; all scamped and hasty and shuffling work, all clumsiness and *à peu près* and misfire, all false adaptation and misuse of instruments and faculties and leaving of things undone or half done is offensive and foreign to her temper.... Nothing short of a perfect perfection satisfies her and she is ready to

face an eternity of toil if that is needed for the fullness of her creation. Therefore of all the Mother's powers she is the most long-suffering with man and his thousand imperfections. Kind, smiling, close and helpful, not easily turned away or discouraged, insistent even after repeated failure, her hand sustains our every step on condition that we are single in our will and straightforward and sincere; for a double mind she will not tolerate and her revealing irony is merciless to drama and histrionics and self-deceit and pretence. A mother to our wants, a friend in our difficulties, a persistent and tranquil counsellor and mentor, chasing away with her radiant smile the clouds of gloom and fretfulness and depression, reminding always of the ever-present help, pointing to the eternal sunshine, she is firm, quiet and persevering in the deep and continuous urge that drives us towards the integrality of the higher nature. All the work of the other Powers leans on her for its completeness; for she assures the material foundation, elaborates the stuff of detail and erects and rivets the armour of the structure.⁵

This is not mere description, this is not imaginative portraiture; this is seeing and saying, this is *utterance* of Being and the *naming* and *thanking* of the Holy (as Heidegger might have put it), and the sadhaks too were profoundly involved in the experience. In fact, most of those who were drawn to the Ashram after Sri Aurobindo's retirement in 1926, happened to have darshan of the Mother first and surrendered to her, and had darshan of Sri Aurobindo only later on the four annual *darśan* days. For example, the Delhi businessman, Surendranath

⁵ *The Mother* (1965), pp. 48-53.

Jauhar, went first to the Ashram in December 1939, had *darśan* of the Mother during meditation, and the effect on him was immediate and definitive:

While she stood there statue-like, I felt as if she was suddenly soaring above.... Her departure was as blissful and mysterious as her advent.... I could clearly see that my destiny had been decided and that the die had been cast.... This, then, was the supreme discovery of my life, the miracle of Pondicherry where I lost my heart and won the real life.⁶ Certainly, the passing of Sri Aurobindo when it happened was a terrible wrench, but at least after the miracle of the supramental sustenance of the body in a new splendour of illumination for over four days, most of the sadhaks felt reconciled to the event, and indeed accepted it as a necessary step in the collective sadhana of the Ashram.

But suppose — Fear and Anxiety wondered — suppose the Mother chose to return to France! Or — suppose she too decided to leave the body! But she assured Dr. Sanyal: “I have no intention of leaving my body for the present”; and she told Surendranath Jauhar, “I intend to stay with you all”. As for Sri Aurobindo’s passing, she said again on 29 December 1950:

Our Lord has sacrificed himself totally for us.... He was not compelled to leave his body, he chose to do so for reasons so sublime that they are beyond the reach of human mentality.... And when one cannot understand, the only thing is to keep a respectful silence.

And so the pulses of Ashram life began to beat again, and although all seemed to have changed on 5 Decem-

* *Mother India*, June 1968, pp. 354-5.

ber, now little seemed actually to have changed. It was not difficult for the sadhaks — and even for the visitors — to infer out of the physical absence of the Master a more effective presence, and even omnipresence. It was verily a resurrection exceeding all human expectations and calculations.

Revisiting the Ashram in 1951 after the passage of twelve years, Tan Yun-shan of Cheena-Bhavana, Visva-bharati, recorded:

The Ashram has now grown up.... It is a growing, not of the nature of an ordinary society or organisation. It is a growing towards a divine life.... It is indeed a divine home for all.... I would say: "If there is a divine home in the world, it is this, it is this..."⁷

In March 1952, K. M. Munshi — then Governor of Uttar Pradesh — paid a second visit to the Ashram. Five months after his first visit, the news of Sri Aurobindo's passing had made his mind a blank for two hours — the news had stunned him even more than Gandhiji's death, the agony of which Munshi had personally experienced. Now as he approached the *samādhi*, he felt deeply moved:

Enclosed within this stone monument were the remains of the man who, for sixty years, had lived and taught the true message of India; who, for forty years, had stormed the fortress of the Unknowable in order that the world's life might be broadened into Divine Consciousness.⁸

As for the Mother, although "a tennis-playing, silk-garmented lady of seventy-five, carrying a tenuous veil and blessing the Ashramites at the march past day after day

⁷ *ibid.*, 15 August 1951. ⁸ *ibid.*, September 1952, p. 3.

was not exactly a symbol of spirituality to the normal Indian mind", Munshi himself felt no insurmountable mental barriers of that kind. As he put it simply:

I believe that a God-realised person like Sri Aurobindo can do nothing for self-interested ends or as a result of some delusion. If Sri Aurobindo is what I acknowledge him to be, then I must logically grant that the Mother cannot be anything other than what he tells us she is....⁹

And so the sadhaks and the outside world survived the shock of Sri Aurobindo's passing, and the Ashram too more than survived the crisis. There was actually a new spurt of expansion, a new sense of dedication, a new marvel of collective sadhana and realisation. The sadhaks increased in number, the School grew new wings of aspiration and achievement, and the Services and Departments proliferated purposively.

In the meantime, Sri Aurobindo's writings were gaining for him a world audience. Already in 1947, Judith Tyberg had come to the Ashram (*via* Benaras), received the name 'Jyotipriya' from Sri Aurobindo, and found her true vocation; and in 1953 she organised the East-West Cultural Centre to help others in their spiritual difficulties and thereby to find a solution of her own. Pitrim A. Sorokin of Harvard had found Sri Aurobindo's works "a sound antidote to the pseudo-scientific psychology, psychiatry and educational art of the West". Sri Aurobindo's five major works — *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity* — had appeared in a popular American edition in 1950, and interest in his thought and his life-work was being stimulated in circles that

⁹ *ibid.*, September 1952, p. 2.

counted. Frederic Spiegelberg of Stanford University had felt "knocked over" when he read *The Life Divine* in 1947, and after visiting the Ashram in 1947 expressed the conviction that Sri Aurobindo would ere long be known as "a vast power of illumination" and his teachings recognised as "the greatest spiritual voice from India". Presently Spiegelberg was able, with the assistance of Haridas Chaudhuri, to give a key place to Sri Aurobindo in the Department of Asian Studies in the Stanford University. Writing of American students' reactions to Sri Aurobindo, Spiegelberg remarks:

Every time in the course of lectures I arrive at the point where Sri Aurobindo can be introduced, I notice a strange hush falling over the audience; the students forget to write notes, forget to joke with each other, forget practically themselves and their appearance, and listen intently in complete absorption... they all feel that now something relevant is going to be introduced into their lives for which they have been waiting for a long, long time. The very first quotations from Sri Aurobindo's writings have each time this transforming effect on the audience.¹⁰

In England, G. H. Langley's appreciative monograph on Sri Aurobindo had been sponsored by the Royal Society of India and Pakistan, with a Foreword by the Marquess of Zetland. Writing in the *World Review* (October 1949), the Rev. E. F. F. Hill declared, hardly mincing words:

Aurobindo is the greatest contemporary philosopher and great in the company of the greatest mystics of all time.... Aurobindo's psychological insight is so sharp and clear, and the universe it ex-

¹⁰ *The Advent*, February 1951, p. 134.

plores is so vast that, in comparison, Western psychology, even the work of Freud, when one allows in full the measure of its greatness, is like the groping of a child in the dark. The work of Aurobindo compels, not comparison, but concordance with the Fourth Gospel... 'ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free' is one common aspect of their message... he has created a synthesis between her past spiritual achievement and modern European thought, so that the future spiritual destiny of India and the future destiny of Europe are inescapably the same destiny....

We are at the turning-point in the spiritual history of man.... Because Aurobindo is in this world, the world is becoming able to express progressively Unity and Diversity instead of Division, Love instead of Hatred, Truth-Consciousness instead of Falsehood, Freedom instead of Tyranny, Immortality instead of Death.

And writing in 1950 in the *Modern Churchman* on 'Sri Aurobindo: Mystic, Metaphysician and Poet', Sir Robert Bristow remarked:

...reading *The Life Divine* is like the turning of the Globe wherein, rightly understood, is all there is to know and no part is greater or less than another, and all is one.... Both he (Sri Aurobindo) and Jesus the Christ became God-conscious through mystical communion; both perceived that God IS, and that He is Infinite Divine Personality.¹¹

Like Haridas Chaudhuri in America, Arabinada Basu did much to spread the Aurobindonian message in England

¹¹ Quoted in Ravindra Khanna's article on 'The Master's Compassion' in the *Advent*, February 1951, pp. 44-5.

during the years (1953-68) he served as Spalding Lecturer at the University of Durham. And so centre after centre in U.S.A., Canada, Mexico, England, France, Germany, Israel and other countries received and cherished and benefited by the Light from Pondicherry. A war-weary, fear-tormented, terror-haunted world, with pockets of plenty few and far between, a world of wasteful endeavours and violent egotisms looked up for Light and found it neither in the votaries of Demos nor in the Commissars on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Religion had become religionism, science had ceased to be free inquiry being now mortgaged to the armour-plated Defence Establishments, and industry, commerce, even art, literature and education seemed to be helplessly tied to the chariot-wheels of the new soulless despotisms of the world. "The hungry sheep looked up and were not fed." No wonder sensitive spirits looked for a ray of light in the prevailing darkness, a sure antidote to the poison whether of penury or permissiveness. And some few were fortunate enough to stumble upon the right clue and find their way to Pondicherry.

One of them, Jay Smith, has given this account of his making a bee-line to the Ashram:

What brought me here? The sovereign Call of the Divine through the Master's writings. As I read in the New York Public Library his supremely evocative words, 'the Word' sounded in the depths of me. His replies to others' questions spoke straight to my heart, a fresh and compelling Revelation.... It seemed that I was being exhilaratingly liberated from an essentially man-centred cosmos by this Copernicus of the spiritual world.¹²

¹² *Mother India*, January 1955, p. 40.

Writing earlier as "an American Newcomer", he had made the disarming remark: "Hundreds of us in the Ashram are far away from home, ten thousand miles away in some cases. But somehow we are not homesick, for after all 'home is where the Mother is' ".¹³ Another, A. Baudisch an Austrian-German, had long been puzzled by the hiatus created by modern technology between man and his ultimate source of origins:

Modern applied science, technocracy based on it, 'sport', at least its *mise-en-scène*, I cannot integrate with my general outlook on life. The writers I consulted rather affirm me in my view...

In this conflict I came across the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo.... I felt: Here speaks one who wholeheartedly recognises applied physical science and technics, but has not lost communication with the supra-physical world.¹⁴

From Miwani, Africa, the girl 'Huta' wrote on 19 August 1954 to the Mother:

You have given me life. Now I have understood what value life has....

You alone have given me the inspiration that in the remaining years of my life I should commence such a work that I may do good to all — myself as well as others. Make me your musical instrument, give it to the world, so that the world may find joy and peace through the melody of that instrument.

And, indeed, she was soon to find an arbourage in the Ashram and blossom in due course into the painter of the *Savitri* "meditations". "This is how all sincere aspirations are fulfilled", the Mother commented nine years later.

¹³ *ibid.*, June 1953, p. 27. ¹⁴ *ibid.*, March 1955, pp. 19-20.

So, even so, they hearkened to the Flute of Krishna — men, women, children found the call irresistible, and they felt compelled to find their way to the Ashram in Pondicherry, try to come to terms with their ego, and become the Mother's instruments for advancing "Sri Aurobindo's Action". And most of them, were they asked why they were in the Ashram, would have said like Ira without a moment's thought:

Where else could I go, where else could I live after that (i.e. the realisation that for my inmost soul the Ashram was my true home), leaving my true home and my divine Mother?¹⁵

II

The Ashram had always eschewed politics, and even when Sri Aurobindo and the Mother espoused the Allied cause during the war, or when Sri Aurobindo advised the Indian leaders to accept the Cripps Proposals in 1942, they were only acting from the higher spiritual — not the political or national — level. The issue as they saw it was between the Divine and the Asuric forces, and they had to side with the former and try to persuade others also to do so. After independence and partition on 15 August 1947, there still remained the Portuguese and French possessions in India, and Sri Aurobindo naturally felt particularly concerned about the latter. At about this time, the leader of the French Cultural Commission, Maurice Schumann, met Sri Aurobindo with the French Indian Governor, M. Baron, to explore the possibility of opening an Institute in Pondicherry for the study of

¹⁵ *ibid.*, March 1955, p. 48.

Indian and European culture. Sri Aurobindo's suggestion to the Indian and French Governments was that, while Pondicherry and the other French areas should certainly merge with India immediately, they should also have the right to retain their cultural (as distinct from political) contacts with France. The Indian Government wouldn't agree to this at the time, but after Sri Aurobindo's passing, when the unhappy stalemate continued, Surendra Mohan Ghose was asked by C. Rajagopalachari, then Chief Minister of Madras, to meet the Mother and request her to use her good influence to bring about a settlement. According to Surendra Mohan's testimony:

This time I had to tell the Mother and she replied, "You know I don't take interest in politics". I said, "That is true; but now it is not my politics or the Government of India's politics: it is Sri Aurobindo's! He wanted this to be done and in our stupidity we didn't understand then. Now these people (meaning, the Government of India) want to do something on those lines, for which I can expect your blessings". The Mother kept quiet for some time and told me, "All right, go back. If you receive a telegram from me, come again".... After about a month I received a telegram. I came, saw her here (the Ashram). Then she asked me, "Between certain dates — when will you be able to come to Pondicherry? Somebody will come from France; he wants to have a talk with you". Then I told Rajagopalachari that I wanted for some delicate matter a responsible man for consultation and I asked him to tell me when he would be available and fix up a date and note it in his diary too; so that I could come on that day. I informed the Mother of this and went back

and soon afterwards came again. And the whole integration of the French possessions with India was finalised here.¹⁶

Because it was Sri Aurobindo's work, it became the Mother's work too, and the *de facto* merger took place without bitterness on 1 November 1954. It was on that day that the Mother made the declaration regarding her desire to become an Indian citizen without renouncing her French citizenship:

From the first time I came to India — in 1914 — I felt that India is my true country, the country of my soul and spirit. I had decided to realise this wish as soon as India would be free....

But in accordance with Sri Aurobindo's ideal, my purpose is to show that truth lies in union rather than in division. To reject one nationality in order to obtain another is not an ideal solution....

I am French by birth and early education, I am Indian by choice and predilection. In my consciousness there is no antagonism between the two... my only aim in life is to give a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo's great teaching and in his teaching he reveals that all the nations are essentially one and meant to express the Divine unity upon earth through an organised and harmonious diversity.

Whatever the legal difficulties, this concept of double citizenship was a challenge to the reign of national egoisms, and was to lead, with the launching of the "World Union" movement with its headquarters in the Ashram, to the imaginative concept of world citizenship as well.

¹⁶ From the report of his speech at Pondicherry (*Mother India*, February 1971, p. 31). Earlier, in a private talk at Delhi, Surendra Mohan told me the story in almost exactly the same words.

It was also on 1 November 1954 that the Mother distributed the "Spiritual Flag of India", projecting the vision of a "free and united India" — including all the India of the pre-partition days, and Burma and Ceylon besides. This flag had been originally designed for the J. S. A. S. A. (*Jeunesse Sportive de l'Ashram de Sri Aurobindo*) with the Master's approval, but was found to express equally the spiritual mission of India in that moment of agony and triumph, 15 August 1947. Current disabilities and discontents notwithstanding, the flag was still a symbol and a dream and a hope and an aspiration, and gave an outer image to an inwardly perfecting reality. There is a unity transcending the political, a unity that is the solvent of all political and economic differences, a unity that makes mock of our regional, communal, casteist, linguistic and other separatist passions. Salt, sugar and several other 'solid' substances lose their sharp identity when they come into contact with water and get dissolved in it. In the white (or colourless) rays of the sun are lost the divers distinct colours of the rainbow:

The One remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly.

Like the etheric field, there is the emotional and intellectual field that makes possible the communication of feelings and thoughts. There is likewise a spiritual field that sustains the manifoldness and seeming contradictoriness of the phenomenal play. There is a Truth, Power, Love that sustains the Unity of India, the unity of India's history which is a five thousand year old reality transcending the political vicissitudes that have shown up on the surface of our national life. The Spiritual Flag of India was meant to symbolise this essential — this un-

conquerable — Unity of India.

Increasingly after 24 November 1926, it had been brought home to the sadhaks that, as the sadhana had entered the subconscious and even inconscient regions, there were bound to be mounting difficulties because of the intractability of physical determinism. But the aim of the integral Yoga was to replace the physical determinism that seemed to be so irresistible by a new freedom and puissance resulting from the infusion into the very cells of the body by the Supramental force. It was perhaps easier to make boys and girls growing up in the Ashram atmosphere to open themselves to the possibility of such an infusion, and a consequent inner awakening, than it would be for older people with set habits of body and mind, with rigidities of instinctive behaviour too difficult to melt, with angularities of preference and prejudice too sharp to smoothen. And yet the Mother saw at the same time that essential “youth” was not a question of age alone. As she said in her article on “Youth”:

Youth does not depend on the fewness of the years one has lived, but on the capacity to grow and to progress: to grow — that is to increase one’s potentialities, one’s capacities; to progress — that is to perfect without halting the capacities that one already possesses. Old age does not come with a great number of years, but with the incapacity or refusal to continue to grow and to progress.¹⁷

But whether old or young, the problem was the same: to carry the work of transformation to the physical level, and to awaken in the dark inconscient the light of consciousness. It is there already, as fire in the flint; what

¹⁷ *Bulletin*, April 1949, p. 28.

is needed is the sharp flick that kindles, the right switch that calls forth the light. In an editorial article in the *Advent* (April 1947), the writer cited these lines from the first Canto of *Savitri* —

A guardian of the unconsolated abyss
 Inheriting the long agony of the globe,
 A stone-still figure of high and godlike Pain
 Stared into space with fixed regardless eyes
 That saw grief's timeless depths but not life's goal.
 Afflicted by his harsh divinity,
 Bound to his throne, he waited unappeased
 The daily oblation of her unwept tears —

and commented as follows:

...the submerged being is not merely dead matter, but a concentrated, a solidified flame, as it were, a suppressed aspiration that burns inwardly, all the more violent because it is not articulate and in the open. The aboriginal is that which harbours in the womb the original being. That is the Inconscient Godhead, the Divinity in pain — *Mater Dolorosa* — the Divine Being who lost himself totally when transmuted into Matter.

Many years later, the Mother gave as the Message for 1956 a declaration that was somewhat puzzling at the time:

The great victories are the least noisy.

The manifestation of a new world is not proclaimed by beat of drum.

On 29 February 1956, a conversation took place between the Mother and the Ashram children. A passage from *The Synthesis of Yoga* was under discussion:

The law of sacrifice is the common divine action that was thrown out into the world in its beginning

as a symbol of the solidarity of the universe. It is by the attraction of this law that a divinising, a saving power descends to limit and correct and gradually to eliminate the errors of an egoistic and self-divided creation. This descent, this sacrifice of the Purusha, the Divine Soul submitting itself to Force and Matter so that it may inform and illuminate them, is the seed of redemption of this world of Inconscience and Ignorance.... The acceptance of the law of sacrifice is a practical recognition by the ego that it is neither alone in the world nor chief in the world. It is its admission that, even in this much fragmented existence, there is beyond itself and behind that which is not its own egoistic person, something greater and completer, a diviner All which commands from it subordination and service.

Towards the end of the discussion, the Mother said:

It is the Divine in the inconscience who aspires to the Divine in the consciousness. That is to say, without the Divine there would be no aspiration; without the consciousness hidden in inconscience, there would be no possibility of changing the inconscience to consciousness. But it is because at the very heart of the inconscience there is the divine Consciousness, that you aspire and... the sacrifice is made.¹⁸

And this is the force behind the prophecy or divine decree in *Savitri*: "Even the body shall remember God".¹⁹ It was during the meditation that followed the discussion — or exposition — that the Mother had the singular mystic experience of the descent of the Supramental

¹⁸ *Mother India*, February 1971, p. 13. ¹⁹ *Savitri*, p. 794.

Light and Force, and she recorded in her diary:

This evening the Divine Presence, concrete and material, was there present amongst you. I had a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, and I was facing a huge and massive golden door which separated the world from the Divine.

As I looked at the door, I knew and willed, in a single movement of consciousness, that "the time has come", and lifting with both hands a mighty golden hammer I struck one blow, one single blow on the door and the door was shattered to pieces.

Then the Supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow.

This was the "Golden Day", the Day of the Lord. But the actual announcement came only on the next Darshan Day, 24 April 1956:

The manifestation of the Supramental upon earth is no more a promise but a living fact, a reality.

It is at work here, and one day will come when the most blind, the most unconscious, even the most unwilling shall be obliged to recognise it.

Again, under the dates "29 February — 29 March", the following appeared in the *Bulletin* of 24 April 1956:

Lord, Thou hast willed, and I execute.

A new light breaks upon the earth,

A new world is born.

The things that were promised are fulfilled.

What had been but a promise on 25 September 1914 — "shall break"... "shall be born"... "shall be fulfilled" — now became, in the Mother's consciousness, an accomplished reality. But, of course, it was not equally obvious to others. After all, great must be the chasm

between "the unthinkable realities and the relativities of the physical world", and any happenings, emergents or even revolutions in the realms of consciousness were unlikely to prove easily amenable to physical perception or measurement. When the children asked her about it, the Mother said:

Like knows like, it is only the Supramental Consciousness in an individual that can perceive the Supermind which is acting in the terrestrial atmosphere.²⁰

And the gates having been forced open, the rushing of the Light upon the earth was more like a "force that spreads itself". It was *there* — it was there all right — though it might take some time for everybody to grow aware of it and participate in its sovereign action. That has always been so with regard to new things. The Force has to spread and filter down slowly. Two years later, after her eightieth birthday, the Mother said that the diffusion of the new Light and Force was progressively taking place over the earth's atmosphere, and the "super-man" too, who would be a species of transition to the Supramental race, was already in the making.²¹

All the time the Ashram was expanding its activities in many directions. From the ends of the world — America, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Australia, Japan, China, Tibet — the seekers came, and being accepted by the Mother remained in the Ashram. The Mother gave them all "work" — work that would bring to objective perfection what was inside them. The inner psychological perfection aimed at was a five-fold efflorescence of sincerity, aspiration, faith, devotion and

²⁰ *Mother India*, May 1956, p. 1.

²¹ *Bulletin*, August 1958, pp. 85-6.

surrender. The Mother invariably looked into the eyes for transparency — the gateway to the soul within. But when she looked and found only a mist, a cloud, a film, a screen, a wall, or something black, of what use could such a person be? Nevertheless she gave a chance to most, and many benefited by the Grace of her Giving. Freedom has always been the basic law of Ashram life, as of Nature's flowering:

The origin of creation is freedom: it is a free choice in the consciousness that has projected itself as the objective world.... Creation means a play of growth: it is a journey, a movement in time and space through graded steps....

And yet there is compulsion. It is the secret pressure of one's own nature that drives it forward through all vicissitudes back again to its original source.... The Grace works and incarnates in and through a body of willing and conscious cooperators: these become themselves part and parcel of the Force that works.²²

To judge by results, it was a fine climate for growth, — one might add, for integral growth. In school or playground, in farm or workshop, in bakery or kitchen, in studio or audition room, in meditation or march past, everywhere, all the time, the spiritual climate was a catalytic for growth in consciousness, for a steady movement towards the beckoning heights of the Life Divine. Thus the Master's power (through his writings and by means of his occult presence), the Mother's Grace and the readiness and extent of the sadhaks' response, these toge-

²² *The Advent*, February 1952, pp. 8-9.

ther conditioned the quality of life in the Ashram and determined its effectivity for world-action.

Such spectacular expansion of activities notwithstanding, the first impression of many — even of some sadhaks — was that it was rather haphazard growth, involving a decline in the intensity of individual and collective sadhana. While in solitariness and selectivity there is concentrated strength, the bigger the group the greater must be the chances of the general or the average level falling lower and lower. On the other hand, in the larger interests of humanity as a whole and because of the need to invoke a general manifestation of the Divine or a general descent of the Divine consciousness, there is the call to organise as a fit receptacle of the manifestation a “critical mass” of aspiring humanity. As the Mother explained in the course of a conversation on 1 February 1956:

That is precisely the problem which faced both Sri Aurobindo here and me in France: is it necessary to limit one's road and reach the goal first, and later take all the rest in hand and begin the work of integral transformation; or is it necessary to go step by step, not leaving anything aside, not eliminating anything on the path, taking in all the possibilities at the same time and progressing at all points at the same time?...

One can understand that things get done by stages: one goes forward, travels a certain distance, and so, as a consequence, takes all the rest forward; and then at the same time, with a simultaneous movement, one travels another stage and again takes others forward — and so on.

This gives the impression that one doesn't ad-

vance. But everything is on the move in this way.²³ Even so, at first and for many years, the Ashram had been only a collection of aspiring individuals, with a salutary sense of community of course, but without a formal organisation. After Sri Aurobindo's passing, the Mother visualised a collectivity "that would not be necessarily limited to the Ashram but would embrace all who have declared themselves... to be disciples of Sri Aurobindo and have tried to live his teaching". The manifestation of the Supramental consciousness in 1956 made it all the more necessary that a collective individuality should be striven for, centrally in the Ashram at Pondicherry, but also sending out creepers of influence and vibrations of spirituality so as to comprise the ever widening Ashram outside the Ashram. The Sri Aurobindo Society thus became—with its branches at various centres—the instrument of enveloping action hastening the advent of a "progressive universal harmony". Besides, there was the Sri Aurobindo Pathmandir at Calcutta, with its continuing record of meritorious work; there was the Sri Aurobindo Library at Madras and there was the Sri Aurobindo Circle at Bombay; and by 1956, there were about 150 Sri Aurobindo Study Centres in India and some fifteen abroad. The desire for Light was growing, indeed, and in response the Light too was spreading. And yet the opening of a Centre wasn't enough; what it did—the spirit in which it was done—was far more important. The Mother set the keynote in her message to one of the Centres:

To open a Centre is not sufficient in itself. It must be the pure hearth of a perfect sincerity in a total consecration to the Divine. Let the flame of

²³ *Mother India*, August 1970, p. 398.

this sincerity rise high above the falsehood and the deceptions of the world.²⁴

And while talking to Jay Smith in connection with the working of these Centres, the Mother made the important distinction between work for the Divine and the Divine's work. It wouldn't be enough to offer our work to the Divine in a spirit of *niskāma karma*; it would be equally necessary to participate consciously in the Divine's work, yet without one's ego interfering and messing up things.

In Delhi, India's capital city through the ages, a Centre had functioned since 1943, first in an upstairs hall in Sunderson Company in Connaught Circus, and later at Surendranath Jauhar's spacious building on Mehrauli Road (now Sri Aurobindo Marg). When Surendranath wanted to know how best the property could be put to use in the service of the Mother, she said simply: "But why? This place will house the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch, and there certainly will be a Shrine, for which I have been keeping Sri Aurobindo's precious relics".²⁵ She also said that there was no need for a special Constitution; the Delhi Branch would be part of the Ashram at Pondicherry. In her message of benediction and consecration on 12 February 1956 she said: "Let this place be worthy of its name and manifest the true spirit of Sri Aurobindo's teaching and message to the world". Two months later, on 23 April 1956, she inaugurated from Pondicherry the Mother's School at the Delhi Branch of the Ashram: "A new Light has appeared upon earth. Let this new School opened today be guided by it". The

²⁴ Quoted by Jay Smith, *Mother India*, July 1957, p. 51.

²⁵ *Pioneer of the Supramental Age* (1958), pp. 14-5.

Supramental manifestation had already taken place on 29 February, and Delhi was exhorted to be ready to receive and exemplify it. Then, on 5 December 1957, Sri Aurobindo's relics, which Indra Sen had brought in a casket from Pondicherry, were installed in the marble shrine in the Delhi Ashram compound by Dr. C. D. Deshmukh. And there, as Melville de Mello said in his AIR broadcast, in a "grey marble edifice, and in full view of the world-famous Qutab Minar, but shielded as it were by chant and flower, far from the bustle and noise of the town", there reposed the sacred relics, sanctifying the surroundings and the great historic city itself. Writing on Sri Aurobindo and on the enshrinement of the relics at the Delhi Ashram, Professor Jean Herbert of the University of Geneva wrote:

Even those most allergic to anything that smells of mysticism... must acknowledge Sri Aurobindo as one of the greatest men, not only of our age, but of all ages. His all-embracing, crystal clear and profound philosophy is assuredly a contribution to human thought, vision and progress which ranks with that of Plato, Kant, Bergson or Goethe... the findings of Sri Aurobindo which we have no means of verifying at our level of experience actually supply all the consistency which strikes us in the explanation given by Sri Aurobindo for facts which we do know, an all-embracing consistency, the equivalent of which does not seem to have been attained by any other known thinker....

Now thousands who had Sri Aurobindo's *darśan* could not help believing that they were face to face with a great saint and sage.... His look very clearly had in it something superhuman, which might be

said to put it as far above the human look as the latter is above the look of a dog or a cat... the present position of New Delhi in India and in the world at large certainly makes it a very important and convenient place from which to radiate spirituality. Let us hope that the presence of those relics being installed in the Shrine at the Delhi Branch of Sri Aurobindo Ashram will have an uplifting influence both on those who live nearby and on a large portion of mankind.²⁶

Sri Aurobindo had left India in April 1910, and he had at last returned to her Capital, there to abide and by his eternal immanence to guide and redeem and change the world. He had come to Delhi indeed, to New Delhi, not like the military conquerors of old trailing rivers of blood, but as a conqueror of spiritual realms, as the architect of the Life Divine in the coming Supramental Age. And the gods themselves seemed to welcome him to Delhi, for although it was a bleak winter morning, "a brisk shower of rain followed the installation, and then the sun broke through to make the marble Shrine and its flower decorations (a mass of rose petals and marigolds and sunflowers) glisten and flash their inimitable message".²⁷ And Naresh Bahadur has celebrated the event with a piece of richly evocative verse:

O beauty crystalline,
The Master's hallowed shrine,
O quiescent form divine,
We pray and bow to thee...

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 57-60.

²⁷ Melville de Mello's AIR broadcast on 5 December 1957 (*Pioneer of the Supramental Age*, p. 21).

Sheath within magic sheath,
O missioned relics breathe
And to ailing earth bequeath
Heaven-bearing potency...

From the vault of thy retreat
In this old imperial seat:
New-chosen paraclete
To the Spirit's empire free...

From the last transcendent height
Hail the new Life, Love, Light,
As miracles of thy might,
And to man thy legacy.²⁸

III

We have seen how, with the coming of children to the Ashram during the war, there arose the necessity to open a school, which was inaugurated on 2 December 1943. Then, on account of the Calcutta killings and other sanguinary riots during 1946-7, the Mother introduced physical education for adults as well. But behind these developments there were other germinating ideas too. Surendra Mohan Ghose has reported that Sri Aurobindo once told him (probably in 1939):

The Mother is trying to develop this Ashram into a university, but not according to the common conception of a university.... Everybody will be

²⁸ 'Sheath within magic sheath' is a reference to the four caskets: the gold which contained the relics, encased successively in the silver, sandalwood and rosewood caskets.

taught to work, not with any profit motive, but in a spirit of service.²⁹

Already as a Professor at the Baroda College in the eighteen-nineties, Sri Aurobindo had felt keenly the inadequacies of the ruling system of education (a half-hearted transplantation of the British system which had its detractors even in its native habitat), and thought of an alternative system more in consonance with India's native traditions and also her peculiar present needs. His educational idealism stretched towards new dimensions during his brief spell of Principalship of the National College at Calcutta, and later during the years of silent Yoga at Pondicherry. Thus, from the very beginning, there was no question of the Ashram School mechanically adopting the norms of the outside schools. It was not a question of doing a little better than what was being done elsewhere. "What we want", the Mother said, "is precisely to bring into the world something which is not there." The Ashram School developed a character of its own, and between 1943 and 1950 it grew more and more conscious of its destiny and moved in directions of its own deliberate choice. Different subjects were no doubt "taught", but in the preoccupation with the branches and the leaves, the trunk and the roots of the Tree of Knowledge were not forgotten. The Mother gave special importance to the annual sports and cultural programmes, for they gave synoptic unity to the past year's aspirations and projected the new year's; and among the items on 1 December 1948 were 'Hymn to the Mother', 'The Sleeping Beauty' and 'Rose of God', and on 1 December 1949, the Mother's play *Vers l'Avenir*, recitations from *Savitri* and from *Prayers and Meditations*.

²⁹ *Mother India*, March 1971, p. 115.

In the enrolment of pupils and the choice of teachers, in the organisation of studies, sports and community life, the School remembered its close Ashram affiliations — it was not merely a School located in the Ashram, it was the Ashram School — and the Mother was the effective Head of the School and Ashram both.

Almost the first major development after Sri Aurobindo's passing was the summoning of the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Convention to Pondicherry. The meeting, attended by a representative and distinguished gathering of leaders, intellectuals and educationists from all over India, was held on 24 April 1951 at the Tennis Ground of the Ashram, and concluded its deliberations the next day. In her inaugural message the Mother said:

Sri Aurobindo is present in our midst, and with all the power of his creative genius he presides over the formation of the University Centre which for years he considered as one of the best means of preparing the future humanity to receive the supramental light that will transform the *élite* of today into a new race manifesting upon earth the new light and force and life.

In his presidential address, Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukherjee pointed out that, since we had "lost track of our real culture" and opted for "a base hedonistic view of life", the establishment of a university "where the eternal verities of life will be taught and re-taught to a stricken people" was of supreme relevance. "I am sure", he concluded, "the proposed university will symbolise the world's urge for a new spiritual rebirth; it will stand out as an oasis amidst the barren tracts that breed jealousies, suspicions and petty conflicts".³⁰

³⁰ Vide Report of the Convention published in *The Advent*, August

Even before the Convention met, it was known that Barindra Kumar Ghose, Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, was opposed to the idea of an international university at Pondicherry in Sri Aurobindo's name, partly because Pondicherry was still a French possession, and partly because, in Barindra's opinion, the right memorial to Sri Aurobindo should be, not a university, but a Yogic Centre "carried on under the guidance of great Indian Yogis". One of the participants in the Convention, Hemendra Prasad Ghose, referred to the issues raised by Barindra and convincingly answered them. After all, Sri Aurobindo had told Surendra Mohan that the idea was to develop the Ashram into a university. Where else except in an Ashram — an Ashram of the Vedic type presided over by modern Rishis — could boys and girls receive the blessings of an "integral education"? And the Ashram being already in Pondicherry — a sanctified spot with its roots in the Vedic past — where else was the proposed university centre to be located? Another speaker, Somnath Maitra, affirmed:

The new university will be informed by the spirit of our great Master, the spirit of the Life Divine... it will be invisibly fashioned and moulded at every turn by a sense of his deathless Presence.

Dr. Kalidas Nag referred to the different phases of Sri Aurobindo's career devoted respectively to the political liberation of Asia, the intellectual liberation of his epoch and the spiritual liberation of mankind, and concluded with the words:

Thus, Sri Aurobindo is the University pointing to a radically new conception of the term. It should not be a mere copy of any of the universities of

India or abroad. Sri Aurobindo University should aspire to provide the training ground for youths who would build up a new personality in a new universe.

Nolini Kanta Gupta too explained the ideal as "nothing less than the founding of a new mankind upon earth — with a new life and a new consciousness". The sense of the Convention was that the emphasis in the proposed university should be on quality, not quantity in terms of size and numbers: that, of the two kinds of knowledge — that obtained by an approach from the outside through the intellect and that obtained from within by spiritual realisation — the proposed university should restore to the latter its rightful place and help the pupils to receive "integral" rather than piecemeal education: and, finally, that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother — their thought, their personality or influence, their Yogic direction — should give creative unity to the University and the Ashram.

Since there was already the nucleus of a University Centre in the Ashram School, which in the course of seven or eight years had gathered a band of dedicated teachers and gained valuable experience in dealing with Ashram children in an Ashram atmosphere, the Mother lost no time in inaugurating the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre on 6 January 1952, and the pupils were given a Prayer that is also an inspired definition of the true goal of education:

Make of us the hero warriors we aspire to become.

May we fight successfully the great battle of the future that is to be born, against the past that seeks to endure; so that the new things may manifest and

we be ready to receive them.

Support to the idea of a university at the Ashram — a university nurtured in the ambience of the Spirit — had come from near and far; for example, Salvador de Madariaga had said in his message to the Convention:

The analytical age is coming to its close.... The age of synthesis is about to begin. And how could it begin if no high centre of perspective were provided for all the parts to fall into harmony?

But the channelling of financial support was slow and inadequate. Nevertheless the Mother herself gave away all her jewellery to the University Centre, and so that they might realise their full value, they were sold by auction in the last week of December 1952.³¹ And the Mother was by no means impatient, for she had told K. M. Munshi in March 1952: "I am building up slowly, step by step, but firmly".³² For one thing, from kindergarten to the higher courses, it was one continuous spectrum; and again, from physical to spiritual — covering on the way vital, mental and psychic education — was viewed as one integral whole. That from the very beginning the Mother herself saw the University playing a seminal role in the fulfilment of Sri Aurobindo's mission may be inferred from the categorical affirmations in her letter of 28 May 1953 to Surendranath Jauhar:

I am perfectly sure, I am quite confident, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind, that this University, which is being established here, will be the greatest seat of knowledge upon earth.

It may take fifty years, it may take a hundred years, and you may doubt about my being there;

³¹ *Mother India*, December 1952, p. 72.

³² *ibid.*, September 1952, p. 6.

I may be there or not, but these children of mine will be there to carry out my work.

And those who collaborate in this divine work today will have the joy and pride of having participated in such an exceptional achievement.

A new seed, the seed of integral knowledge, was being sown; and the time of sprouting and foliage and flowering would come, and the harvesting too of the New Life, the supramental manifestation upon earth.

There was a steady — though not spectacular — growth from year to year, and in 1959 the University Centre was re-named as the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, avoiding the word “university” with its restrictive and hence inhibiting associations. In due course the Centre organised the four basic Faculties (Arts, Science, Engineering Technology and Physical Education), several Residential Homes, and the necessary facilities for study, practical work, athletics, sports, recreation, medical care, painting, music, dance and drama. By 1970, there were about 750 pupils (most of them in residence), and the teaching and tutorial staff (whole-time and part-time) numbered over 200, all of them sadhaks of the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. And the links between the Ashram and the Centre of Education were intimate, purposive and creative.

The practical basis of the Centre of Education is the firm conviction that the answer to the current speed of cyberneticisation resulting in man's increasing alienation and dehumanisation is not a return to primitivism abandoning the fruits of civilisation and culture and all the gains of science and technology, but rather a centering of all aspiration, all thoughts, all activities in the Spirit

— with the soul, first awakening to its true nature, then trying to achieve rapport with all humanity, all Nature, and the universe itself. In his essay 'A System of National Education', published as long ago as 1907, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

Everyone has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use.³³

The key to knowledge is within, for it is the awakened soul within that observes, records, sorts out, omits, unites, transmutes, and turns facts and information into knowledge, knowledge into wisdom, and wisdom into the dynamo of right aspiration and action. The spark is indeed within, albeit often obscured by the thick fog of the egoistic prison-house. It is the true task of education to provide the atmosphere, the friendly help or guidance, the leverage that will release the spark and make it flame forth into a blaze of consciousness characterised by an ever-increasing intensity and wideness. The physical, the vital, the mental, all will be drafted into this adventure of consciousness, but still the soul will be the rider of the chariot that is the body, with the vital and the mind as the twin horses of the race. Sri Aurobindo has defined Yoga as "a methodised effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the potentialities latent in the being, and a union of the human individual with the universal and transcendent Existence". In its far aims as also in its essential processes, education coales-

³³ *A Scheme of Education*, edited by Pranab Bhattacharya (1952), p.32.

ces with Yoga, and it is thus no mystery at all that the Centre of Education is an inseparable part of the Yogashram at Pondicherry.³⁴

Since education is viewed essentially as a field conducive to soul-awakening and soul-growth, the Centre has no use for the artificial distinction between education for boys and education for girls. The Centre of Education accordingly provides the same programme — including physical education — for boys and girls. There is still room for plenty of choice, but the options are made by the inner preference and not by the mere fact of sex or the compulsion of traditional taboos. Again, what brings pupils and teachers together in the general run of educational institutions is a system of marketplace attitudes and monetary objectives. At the Centre of Education, on the contrary, pupils pay no fees — once admitted, the education is free. As for the teachers, although fully qualified for the work they have to do, they are only maintained by the Ashram like the other sadhaks and receive no salaries or other monetary awards. This elimination of the rancour of the marketplace and the lure of mere monetary incentives makes for better pupils and better teachers who are brought together, not as buyers or sellers of knowledge, but as fellow-seekers and pilgrims on the march owing an unswerving allegiance to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as the embodiments of Truth and Love. Academic and hierarchic differentiations have a functional use only, and are not meant to invade the deeper unity that derives from the common spirit of dedication and self-consecra-

³⁴ For a fuller account of the Centre of Education, the reader is referred to my article 'The Ashram and the Centre of Education' in *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, 26th Number (1970), pp. 30-47.

tion. The Centre of Education is a community, almost a single consciousness, that is trying to realise to the full its evolutionary possibility.

But while the Centre of Education has no use for artificial distinctions — distinctions that become barriers to mutual understanding — neither does it believe in exclusiveness or any imposed uniformity or regimentation. It is demonstrably an *international* Centre covering all the details of existence. Knowledge, after all, knows no national barriers, and all that man has aspired and laboured for, all the milestones he had passed, all the knowledge he has garnered — all art, science, sport, handicraft, entertainment --- are the common heritage of mankind. Among the languages studied or in use are Sanskrit, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Marathi, Oriya, Tamil, Telugu, English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The main media of instruction are English and French, and pupils usually know four or five languages. The Sri Aurobindo Library with its accession of over 60,000 books in about 25 languages attempts to make a global coverage, and the Ashram Press has published already about 1000 books in about fifteen languages, including twelve in Chinese! Once centred in the Spirit, all outer variations can only enrich the play of life, and at the Centre of Education as in the Ashram there grows a truly international community preparing for the future "One World".

"Be firm and strong and full of faith", the Mother once exhorted the children; "fight in order to win, as you say, the great victory". Any imposition of a rigid discipline from without must smack of tyranny, and children especially — like flowers — wither all too soon and lose the native hue of freshness under the glare of

such "discipline". On the other hand, there is an inner law, an innermost truth of things, which prescribes the norms of behaviour, and the problem of education is to help this law, this truth, to come out to the forefront of its own accord, and suffer no obscuration or perversion. Pupils and teachers are both heirs to limitless liberty, but to follow this path one needs to have consciousness of the Divine Presence in oneself and know too that the Divine is present in all others as well. "Freedom" is indeed the very oxygen of the whole scheme of things at the Centre of Education, but it is held in leash by the paramountcy of Truth, by the Law at the heart of all existence. The academic courses are not stereotyped, the training is not cheaply utilitarian nor solely through specialist grooves, the pupils are not specifically equipped to take their place in the rat-race of the outside world. The aim really is to usher in a new race, ready to face and shape the future, and leave the past far, far behind.

The "free progress education" now in force at the Centre of Education expects the pupil to follow Satyakama Jabala's example and rely on his soul rather than on habits, conventions or preconceived ideas. The whole aim is to make the educational process spontaneous, flexible and evolutionary and not artificial, rigid and static. Education thus becomes a joyous adventure in self-discovery, and not a tyrannical infliction from without. And what the Centre of Education itself provides is an atmosphere of protection and affection in which the child's impulse to joyous self-discovery finds the necessary warmth for full flowering and fruition. For any success to attend this experiment, not only much would depend on the children themselves, but an equal respon-

sibility would lie on the teachers also. The Mother has said that, to be a good teacher, one has to be a hero, a saint and a yogi, and this is by no means easy of realisation; but even to be conscious of the ideal is something surely gained. The pupils too aim to become "hero warriors" ready to wage the war and win the battle of the future, — a real future and not a mere continuation of the present. But becoming "hero warriors" would not incapacitate them from being also good managers and technicians, expert scientists and economists, or accomplished artists and poets. The mark of the "hero warrior" would be a function of the awakened soul in contact with the eternal Spirit, and — since he would have received training in particular disciplines or skills too — he would also be able to execute perfectly the tasks that might come his way. Used to self-reliance in education, he would be self-reliant in all situations, drawing the needed strength from the reservoir of the Spirit. In other words, an integral education that has helped the full flowering of love, knowledge, power and beauty will also ensure a complete efficiency in meeting all the demands of the future. Beyond such integral education, the Mother visualises a further development still in consonance with Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future:

From beyond the frontiers of form, a new force can be evoked, a power... which, by its emergence, will be able to change the course of things and bring to birth a new world.... Then will begin also a new education which can be called the supramental education; it will, by its all-powerful action, work not only upon the consciousness of individual beings, but upon the very substance of which they are built and upon the environment in which they

live... the supramental education will result, not merely in a progressively developing formation of the human nature, an increasing growth of its latent faculties, but a transformation of the being in its entirety, a new ascent of the species above and beyond man towards superman, leading in the end to the appearance of the divine race upon the earth.³⁵

That is, however, still a consummation yet to be consummated in the remote future, but the roots of the future are in the present and the burden is upon us not to allow the roots to be gathered with the ashes of the past.

Education — all education — is nothing if not dynamic, and education in its wideness must embrace all life, and knowledge must continually test and extend itself through 'research'. The Centre of Education is thus also a Centre of Research, and the Ashram in its entirety is a laboratory for research into the problem of ends and means covering the whole field of life. It may be interjected: "But research means controlled experimentation, recordation, processing data and interpreting them, testing, and periodical assessment"! This is no doubt true, and in a broad sense the results of Yoga also are under observation and assessment. Sri Aurobindo himself once wrote to a disciple:

...although we have faith... we do not found ourselves on faith alone, but on a great ground of knowledge which we have been developing and testing all our lives... more scrupulously than any

³⁵ *A Scheme of Education*, edited by Pranab Bhattacharya (1952), pp. 108-9.

scientist his theory or his method on the physical plane.

The records of Sri Aurobindo's or of the Mother's experiences may seem impossibly distant to average humanity, but even lesser men and women can ask themselves when — and to what extent — they are able to work effortlessly, efficiently, with no sense of struggle or tension, as if the steering had been done by an infallible inner power of consciousness. The sadhak knows that, if there has been failure, or imperfect execution, it can only mean a defective inner consecration, an egoistic withdrawal from the Divine. Likewise, several individuals working together can know when — without any conscious regimentation — they are all able to work as a team, as if a single infallible power of consciousness is active in them all, the same power but functioning from many centres of action. If there is a jolt or a temporary breakdown, it can only mean that the inner link that connected them all and put them in contact with the Divine has snapped somewhere. The awareness of an awakened inner power that makes action effortless as it were, efficient, and a sheer joy must also be duly reflected in the whole manner of life and send out vibrations of peace, goodwill and happiness. Wherever the sadhak may be — alone or in company, working or relaxing — he is a witness spirit prefiguring in some measure the coming man, the man who will never be overwhelmed by a sense of crisis. A channel for the Divine's work, he will always be master of himself yet wholly free from the taint of egoism. The whole system of financial incentives, the desire for position, status and so-called "security", the scramble for power, the itch for "beggaring one's neighbour", the ambition to achieve personal "mag-

nificence" and lord it over others, all these stupidities of the outside world are utterly irrelevant in the Ashram where the only thing that should matter is one's dialogue or relationship with the Divine. The inner calm, the feeling of fulfilment, the sense of communion with the environment, the consciousness of the Divine Presence everywhere and at all times, *these* are the values, these are the incentives and energies that make the sadhak work long — unaffected by doubt and fatigue — and also with a deep sense of joy.

The Ashram, itself a chosen and sheltered field, bears a special relationship to the Centre of Education, like a mother carrying in her womb the child of tomorrow. When children embark on the adventure of consciousness (for that is what education should mean), they bring to the regimen the freshness of innocence, the buoyancy of the unfolding bud and the fervour of excitement. The eager child (or youth) has sometimes to be held in leash by the teacher, and then it must become difficult to say whether the teacher leads the pupil — or is only led by him. Childhood, boyhood, girlhood are a wonderfully plastic stage of human development, and much may be achieved with apparently little effort and in a short time. Children can play at variety with a seeming recklessness and still retain the basis of unity. All is permissible in the Ashram — be it music, or mathematics, or athletics, or making the model of a lunar space-ship, or meditation — and such outer variety spanning out from the still centre within makes for the integral development of the divers instruments of body, mind and soul.

Man partly is and wholly hopes to be, and the evolutionary spiral is a drama that is played by Eternity

but against the background of Time, by Infinity but in the controlled theatre of the earth. Truth eternal and infinite rings changes and beckons to man, and man awakens to his destiny and forges forward. The whole mystique and technique of the evolutionary movement has thus been described by Sri Aurobindo:

Man's... glory is that he is the closed place and secret workshop of a living labour in which supermanhood is being made ready by a divine Craftsman... he is partly an artisan of this divine change; his conscious assent, his consecrated will and participation are needed that into his body may descend the glory that will replace him.

Every man is God's "secret workshop", and any man could be the alchemist-artisan engaged in trying to accomplish the destined "divine change". Is it any wonder, then, that every sadhak, every pupil, in the Ashram is something of a researcher as well, an alchemist-artisan; that his body is his "secret workshop" or divine laboratory; that his whole sadhana — "his conscious assent, his consecrated will and participation" — is the mechanics of the "divine change"?

IV

The next great landmark in the progressive realisation of the world-vision of Sri Aurobindo was the inauguration of the futurist township, 'Auroville', City of Dawn, City of Human Unity, on the outskirts of Pondicherry, on 28 February 1968.³⁶ Seven days earlier, several thousands

³⁶ The problems of the modern city and the way 'Auroville' hopes to solve them and fare forward into the future are the general theme of

of the Mother's disciples had congregated in the Ashram to celebrate her 90th birthday on 21 February. The Auroville inauguration was the Mother's great leap into the future in Sri Aurobindo's name, and blessed were the tens of thousands who witnessed the event, and blessed too were the millions who later watched the extraordinary proceedings on the screen.

As early as 1912 — and before she had met Sri Aurobindo, before there was any such formal institution as Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and before the first world war — the Mother, then Mirra Richard, had jotted down certain notes prefiguring the lines of ideal development for man in a world that shall have banished war and fear and want and ignorance. "The general aim to be attained", she wrote, "is the advent of a progressing universal harmony". First, human unity is to be realised by awakening and manifesting the God in one and all. The Kingdom of God was within everybody; one has only to find one's way to it. Man has to grow in consciousness, and link himself with "one or more of the fountains of universal force". Knowledge has been expanding and exploding in divers directions; but man needs a clue to the synthesis of all this wealth of knowledge, for only such integrated knowledge can serve him truly. Man the individual and 'collective man' or the human aggregate have no reason to pull in different directions. The aim should rather be to establish "an ideal society in a propitious spot for the flowering of a new race, the race of the Sons of God". The Son of Man must strive to outgrow his limitations and become the Son of God, and human beings should learn to enact the collective life

the first eight talks in my *A Big Change: Talks on the Spiritual Revolution and the Future Man* (1970).

of a Divine Society. A double attempt at self-perfection is thus called for: individual transformation and social transformation, or the perfection of the individual and the perfection of the race. Before the entire race can be perfected, we may have to start with experimental groups that strive in their individual and collective life towards perfection. The members of such a group will (i) strain towards self-perfection; (ii) exemplify such striving to others; and (iii) found a "typic society". Along with the discipline of inner development and growth in spiritual or Divine consciousness, there should also be an external action depending on one's "capacities and personal preferences" which best brings out his potentialities and enables him to play his own unique note in the "terrestrial symphony".³⁷

Two years later, having met Sri Aurobindo for the first time, she wrote: "Little by little the horizons become precise, the path becomes clear".³⁸ Then began the collaboration on the *Arya*, but as the Mother left for France in 1915, it was left to Sri Aurobindo to elaborate in all its splendorous particularity their world-vision of the Future. A double change and an integrated change and a total transformation: an inner or individual change or integration, a social or collective change and global human integration, and a total transformation of man and society and humanity — these were the "goals" towards which man and the human aggregate were urged to fare forward: *caraiveti! caraiveti!*

Homo Sapiens is caught in an evolutionary crisis, which is also a psychological crisis: man has to break the egoistic mould within, release the imprisoned soul,

³⁷ *Conversations* (1966 Edition), pp. 1-2.

³⁸ *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 88.

and let it grow the wings of a new consciousness that will mean also a great accession of power. In all the major *Arya* sequences, Sri Aurobindo wove together the twin strands of individual and collective transformation, though the proportion or emphasis varied from argument to argument. The formula "Perfect the man, perfect the race" doesn't, however, mean a rigid categorical sequence, for there are degrees of perfection, and even as the pioneer can give a push to the society, a reasonably well-ordered society can also prove a catalytic for spurts of advance in selected individuals. If in *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga* the concern is more with the individual — his choice in the evolutionary crisis, his likely curve of development, his summits of possible ascent — in *The Social Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, the concern is more with the human aggregate, its awakening soul, its evolving destiny, its purposive thrust towards the future. As with a human body — which is an aggregate of numberless cells and tissues — sometimes the mind decides and the body obeys, and sometimes the body's instinctive impulse is presently sought to be rationalised and rendered operative by the mind, so too the pioneer spirits and the body of society (or humanity) act and react upon one another, and achieve the periodic lurches towards the future. As Sri Aurobindo wrote towards the end of *The Psychology of Social Development* ('The Human Cycle') in the *Arya* of June 1918:

The Spirit in humanity discovers, develops, builds into form in the individual man: it is through the progressive and formative individual that it offers the discovery and the chance of a new self-creation to the mind of the race. For the communal mind

holds things subconsciously at first or, if consciously, then in a confused chaotic manner; it is only through the individual mind that the mass can arrive at a clear knowledge and creation of the thing it held in its subconscious self.³⁹

If the society of the future is to be a spiritual society, in the place of the collective ego there has to emerge a collective soul, and such group souls have "like the individual to grow according to their own nature and by that growth to help each other, to help the whole race in the one common work of humanity. And that work would be to find the divine Self in the individual and collectivity and to realise spiritually, mentally, vitally, materially its greatest, largest, richest and deepest possibilities in the inner life of all and their outer action and nature".⁴⁰

In such a future spiritualised humanity there could be no room for racism or white-coloured tensions or West-East confrontations. The life within and the life without would be complementary and make one arc of creative living:

The thing to be done is as large as human life, and therefore the individuals who lead the way will take all human life for their province. These pioneers will consider nothing as alien to them, nothing as outside their scope. For every part of human life has to be taken up by the spiritual, — not only the intellectual, the aesthetic, the ethical, but the dynamic, the vital, the physical; therefore for none of these things or activities that spring from them will they have any contempt or aversion,

³⁹ *The Human Cycle* (American Edition, 1950), p. 274.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 286.

however they may insist on a change of the spirit and a transformation of the form... knowing that the Divine is concealed in all, they will hold that all can be made the spirit's means of self-finding and all can be converted into its instruments of divine living.⁴¹

Individuals enacting coherence and harmony in a society would lead ultimately to societies enacting unity and creative peace on a global scale, but such an experiment must start first as a pilot project in a propitious atmosphere. The ideal was enunciated by Sri Aurobindo in the last chapter of *The Ideal of Human Unity*, which appeared at the same time (July 1918) as the last chapter of *The Human Cycle*:

A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future... (it) means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one.... By its growth within us oneness with our fellow-men will become the leading principle of all our life, not merely a principle of co-operation, but a deeper brotherhood, a real and an inner sense of unity and equality and a common life.⁴²

Sri Aurobindo saw very clearly what was happening obscurely behind the phenomenal play, and he saw too that man had it in him to advance or retard this evolutionary movement. This was the reason why he put so much urgency into his exhortation that in the Hour of God it was not for man to hesitate or calculate but to go forth and conquer the future.

After the Mother's return to Pondicherry in 1920, she

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 297.

⁴² *The Ideal of Human Unity* (American Edition, 1950), pp. 322-3.

found in the small group around Sri Aurobindo the beginnings of the "ideal" or "typic" society she had dreamt about, and after the Ashram began to grow from 24 November 1926 under her direct charge, she once said in the course of a conversation that when the Supramental presence became an accomplished fact a "model town" could be ushered into being as the harbinger of the perfect world of the future. Sri Aurobindo had written on 7 April 1920 (less than three weeks before the Mother's second coming) that with "a hundred complete men, purified of petty egoism, who will be the instruments of God", he would be able to wake up the sleeping godhead and create conditions facilitating the advent of the Life Divine. After the Mother's coming and her taking full charge of the Ashram, the "complete men" he had asked for came readily enough, and there were 100 by 1930, and 350 by 1942, and twice as many by 1950. The second world war was a matter of life or death for the soul of the world, and the struggle between the Divine and Asuric forces didn't wholly cease even after the war. The Ashram, however, kept up its growth, and the expansion continued uninterrupted after the withdrawal of the Master on 5 December 1950. The Ashram School became the University Centre and presently changed its name to Centre of Education, and in other ways too the Ashram — while retaining its identity as a Yogashram — continued to forge newer and newer lines of development.

On 10 July 1954, the Mother in a Message to the Employees of the Ashram said:

My aim is to create a big family in which it will be possible for every one to fully develop his capacities and express them... my idea is to build a

kind of city accommodating at the outset about 2000 persons. It will be built according to the most modern plans, meeting all up-to-date requirements of hygiene and public health.... Nothing necessary for life will be forgotten.... Every one can choose the kind of activity that is most suitable to his nature and will receive the required training... for admission to live in this ideal place the conditions that need to be fulfilled are good character, good conduct, honest, regular and efficient work, and a general goodwill.⁴³

It was also in 1954 that the Mother shared with others her great "Dream" of the Life Divine being actually lived upon the earth:

There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth, a place of peace, concord, harmony, where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his sufferings and miseries, to surmount his weakness and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the care for progress would get precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the seeking for material pleasures and enjoyment....

The earth is certainly not ready to realise such an ideal, for mankind does not yet possess the necessary knowledge to understand and accept it, nor the indispensable conscious force to execute it....

Yet this dream is on the way of becoming a rea-

⁴³ *Mother India*, July 1954, pp. 49-50.

lity.... This is exactly what we are seeking to do at the Ashram of Sri Aurobindo on a small scale... little by little we advance towards our goal which, we hope, one day we shall be able to hold before the world as a practical and effective means of coming out of the present chaos in order to be born into a more true, more harmonious new life. But presently things began to happen with unexpected rapidity. On 29 February 1956 there was the descent of the Supramental Light and Force, and in 1958 the Mother testified to the Supramental substance spreading everywhere in the earth's atmosphere.

In the outside world too there were sensational happenings. The "Space Age" began on 4 October 1957, when Russia put the first Sputnik into space to orbit round the earth. Then began the US-USSR space-race, which was to culminate in the first landing on the moon by the American cosmonauts on 21 July 1969, and the second on 25 November. From so far, far away, the cosmonauts could see the earth as a single lovable entity; and walking on the bare lifeless lunar surface, they could appreciate what a wonderful place of green and gold and life and variety and infinite possibility the earth was, and it was even reported that Conrad saw on 26 November to the south of Burma and East India "a steady light".⁴⁴

Certainly the world was ready for a change. But neither Sri Aurobindo nor the Mother had ever thought of

⁴⁴ Sisirkumar Mitra's comment on this is interesting: "Whether they (the consmonauts) saw this 'unexplained light' with their physical eye, or in any occult vision opened to them by the spiritual force or by the impact of the infinite space, is not definitely known. Whatever it was, its implication coupled with the region in which it was seen cannot be overlooked" (*The Liberator*, 1970, p. 284.)

a flight to another world or another planet. On 13 January 1934, Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple:

Our attention must be fixed on the earth, because our work is here. Besides, the earth is a concentration of all the other worlds and one can touch them by touching something corresponding in the earth-atmosphere.

The Mother too had said that "in the whole creation the earth has a place of distinction, because unlike any other planet it is evolutionary with a psychic entity as its centre"; and India, in particular, "is a divinely chosen country". As India today sums up the problems, difficulties and sufferings of global humanity, it is up to India to work out solutions that shall redeem her and the whole world as well. And in contemporary India, there is not another centre like the Ashram at Pondicherry with a greater concentration of sadhaks and record of siddhi. It was therefore appropriate that the first great experiment in extending the principles and processes of the Ashram life to a larger collectivity — to a city — a city pointing to the future — should be sought to be unfolded in a hallowed spot close to Pondicherry, in creative collaboration with Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and receiving essential inspiration and support from the Mother herself.

The time had come, the Mother felt, for her "Dream" to have a chance of realisation, for the ideal or mythic society to get started on its career. But the Mother was very clear that the proposed universal town should be above all creeds, all politics, all nationalities; the sole purpose of the township would be to try to realise human unity. The idea was quickly taken up by the Ashram, feelers went out and contacts were made, and at

last the Indian delegate, Pouchpa Dass, moved the resolution during the October-November 1966 general session of UNESCO, recommending the 'Auroville' Project to all the member-nations of the world:

It is an endeavour, unique in the world, to reconcile the highest spiritual life with the exigencies of our industrial civilisation....

Now this extraordinary institution (Sri Aurobindo Ashram), unique in the world by its natural progression, seeks on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of our organisation (UNESCO) ...to enlarge its action and to radiate still further. It wants a vaster centre, a real town where people of the entire world will be ready to live according to the ideal of Sri Aurobindo's thought.... The Government of India wish that the General Conference... give to this unique and exceptional project — in some respects unprecedented — its moral support and its confidence.

The resolution was warmly applauded and unanimously passed by UNESCO, and it became the responsibility of Sri Aurobindo Society and its Secretary-Treasurer, Navajata, to take steps to get the project started mobilising the necessary support. On 19 June 1967, the foundation-stone of the advanced Guest House, Promesse, was laid on the edge of the proposed site of Auroville. The French architect, Roger Anger, soon transformed the abandoned toll-collectors' barracks into comfortable flats. He was also entrusted by the Mother with the responsibility for the lay-out of Auroville and the architecture of its main buildings. There was a stir of anticipation everywhere, work commenced briskly in many directions, and the Mother was always ready with her counsel and put all

her spiritual force behind the stupendous adventure of new creation.

The inauguration or 'dedication' ceremony took place in the forenoon of the appointed day, a week after the Mother's 90th birthday. Almost every nation, big or small, and all the States of the Indian Union were represented. The idea was that children from the different States and nations should bring handfuls of earth from their respective regions, and deposit them in the lotus-shaped urn at the Auroville site, there to mix and mingle so as to symbolise the unity of the earth. The Government of Pondicherry declared a public holiday, and men and women gathered from the ends of the world almost. Before that vast expectant gathering, the "dedication" began at 10:30 with the Mother's message of welcome and reading of the Auroville Charter:

Greetings from Auroville to all men of goodwill.

Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life.

Then the Mother read (from her room in the Ashram) the French version of the Charter, while others read, one after another, the versions in sixteen other languages — Tamil, Sanskrit, English, Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Tibetan. The English version was as follows:

Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.

Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.

Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring toward future realisations.

Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

Although read in several languages, it was really the same song of aspiration in many notes, a bracing prelude to the coming symphony. First two children of the Ashram placed the Charter and some earth from the sacred Ashram soil in the urn. Then children in batches of two from each nation and each State walked up to the urn — itself in the shape of a lotus bud — and deposited the earth they had brought. After the soil of Auroville too had been added, Nolini Kanta Gupta sealed the urn and the inauguration — which had taken 75 minutes in all — concluded in an atmosphere charged with the fervour and hope of a battered world looking forward to the birth of a new world of human unity and collective realisation. Representative children from 124 nations and 23 Indian States — the soil of the earth in which all lands became one — the Mother's benedictions: the conjunction of these betokened the birth of Auroville, the Dawn City that is to rise in splendid fulfilment in close proximity to Sri Aurobindo Ashram. "We do not belong to the past dawns", Sri Aurobindo had said, "but to the noons of the future". The Aurovillian dawn too would in the fullness of time reveal the glory of the noonday Sun when the mists and marsh vapours of the present time would surely disappear, and human unity would cease to be a dream and become a fact. If Marx gave the portentous call, "Proletariat of all nations, unite!",

the Aurovillian call is, "Children of all nations, unite! You have nothing to lose except fear, insecurity and waste. And you have everything to gain!"

The dedication ceremony was widely commented upon, and seemed to raise hopes in a world that had half-reconciled itself to an imminent nuclear holocaust and the end of civilisation. The *Indian Express* wrote that it was "the chance of many life-times to be present at the birth of a city, and of a city, too, that will be in tune with the noblest ideals of India and the world". The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* said that Auroville was "going to be a laboratory of the evolving world city". Angelo Morretta wrote in *Giornale d'Italia* that Auroville would "serve to translate into reality the teachings of the Plato of modern India, Aurobindo Ghosh". The *Times of India* described the simple ceremony as "history in the making, with all countries of the world participating in the first attempt ever to provide mankind with a place where all human beings of goodwill, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world". And other papers described Auroville variously as "City of Hope", "City of Youth", and "a Town named Friendship"!

But the dedication ceremony was no more than the beginning of beginnings. From a hundred sources came streams of significant suggestions. Anxious or curious people visited the 15 square mile site — located partly in Tamil Nadu State, partly in the State of Pondicherry — fringing the Bay of Bengal, and looked for the sudden flowering of the Lotus City, and some went away disappointed, while others thought that the reality might prove to be better even than what had been fondly imagined. Auroville wasn't, after all, just a sum of blue-print and publicity and statistics; it was not even the

case-histories of a few adventurous spirits blazing their independent trails on the as yet largely barren site. Everything would hinge upon the experiment of coaxing the "group soul" to emerge out of the fumbblings of communal living by the pioneers. If success long eluded their efforts, disillusion might erupt easily, and dissolution might follow. The advanced Colony accordingly got going with some trepidation, but also with hope and strength of purpose. As Gene put it, the whole Auroville adventure was to be viewed as "an opportunity to accomplish in a condensed act that which Sri Aurobindo detailed as his *Ideal of Human Unity*"; and —

Not since the first beginnings... have we had available both halves of the necessary conditions for success. An international group prepared to live and work together. This blending is at hand. Call it advance colony or let it happen without being titled, it is the privilege and opportunity to participate in the working out of Sri Aurobindo's ideal and will.⁴⁵

Then, in the early hours of the new year (1969), the Mother — and some others too — had experience of the descent of a consciousness of light, buoyancy, power, joy and peace into the earth atmosphere. And the Mother's new year message was "No words — acts". It was a time for action, for realisation, not vacillation or disputation or procrastination. On the first anniversary of the inauguration of Auroville, in the course of an interview broadcast by AIR, Dr. Malcolm Adiseshiah, Deputy Director-General of UNESCO, said in answer to the question "What gives you hope that Auroville will be a site for material and spiritual researches and of

⁴⁵ *Mother India*, September 1968, pp. 651-2.

endless progress as its Charter declares?":

Well, I think it is the Aurovillians whom I met that are the basis of my hope. They remind me of the Astronauts and the Cosmonauts who, as you know, spend years training themselves for the tremendous task that they have to undertake. The Aurovillians are the Cosmonauts and Astronauts of this new international city of hope, of development, of prosperity and of charity. And it is their spirit which I have seen for myself, the training which they are undergoing, and the concrete pilot-work which they are doing now in actually digging the foundations of this great city that are for me the basis of what you call my hope for Auroville.⁴⁶

Some months later, on 8 October 1969, the Mother in her replies to certain questions on Auroville, insinuated how it would be foolish to be too dogmatic about the unrolling future. Would there be "family life", "religion", "atheism", or "social life" in Auroville? Yes, alas — "if one has not gone beyond that"! *Nothing* would be compulsory! The city-planners and the city-makers, the first Aurovillians and the would-be Aurovillians, always looked for sustenance and guidance to the seminal writings of the Master and the felt presence and active guidance of the Mother, and her periodic affirmations, benedictions and clear directions were pointers to the healthy growth of the dream-city, the city of Divine Manifestation.

Altogether things were on the move, and more or less in the right direction. 'Auro-Garage', 'Auro-Food', 'Maternity Homes for the Children of God', 'Auro Orchard' ... 'Hope' ... 'Auro-Model' ... 'Aspiration' ... 'Auroville Beach', and 'Repos' ... 'Forecomers' from Canada and the United

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, April 1969, pp. 175-6.

States... students from France... "Auroson's Home"... all a bit confusing, perhaps, to the visitor, but exciting all the same, magic casements opening on the uncertain seas of the future to the haven of "knowledge, peace and unity". The Department of Art, too, was busy, and there were plans for a TV Programme. UNESCO had made a first contribution of 3,000 dollars to be used for a TV Project, and it was up to Auroville to make the most of it. William T. Netter, in his report published in *Mother India* (December 1969), made the point that in India art experience had always been "seen in the light of a greater reality". If for the Communist leader Mao Tse-tung God is the mass of the (Chinese) people, if for Marshall McLuhan (and the West) God is at the moment "science and the 'good life'", the proper integral view would be to see God *both* in the great masses of the world's people and in science, the rockets to the moon, and in colour TV sets in every home.⁴⁷ Television would be coming to India in a big way at the same time that the new consciousness would be making itself felt. As Netter said in his third report (March 1970):

When the communications satellite is put up over India in 1972, the greatest and most dynamic confrontation of the East and West in the history of the world will have begun. The peak of Western technology will be joined with the peak of Eastern spirituality....

In a Yoga which demands total transformation there is no question of becoming a guru in the traditional sense. The process of personal transformation is to go on steadily.... In the light of this living

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, December 1969, pp. 706-7.

process, therefore, we should look at television as a means of our own transformation and as a means of a global offering of our share.... Total transformation implies communication, and if there is a new consciousness descending on the world, a new stage of evolution about to be reached, what else is there really worth communicating? With the confrontation of the East and the West so imminent, so crucial, and about to happen in such a dynamic way through television, it is up to India to lead the way in peaceful surrender... to the Will of the Divine.⁴⁸

Auroville will not reject any of the developments of modern technology but only try to bend them to the service of the Divine. Like Netter, there are others too engaged in the problem of rethinking the ends and means of human life in the coming Spiritual Age that will assimilate and carry forward the achievements of modern science and technology; and the speculations and first findings of this thinking have been appearing in *Equals One (=I)*, the futuristic quarterly journal of Auroville, a journal revolutionary in content, illustrations and even in format and binding!

On 14 December 1970, Dr. Adiseshiah was interviewed by the French TV, Paris, and he was more than ever enthusiastic about the Auroville adventure in which he saw "the possibilities of a high level of life which will produce a new civilisation". The foundation of Auroville is "a new kind of spirituality, a new consciousness which we lack today"; Auroville "will never cease to evolve":

...Sri Aurobindo has given us in his works a con-

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, April 1970, pp. 164, 166.

crete illustration or a crystallisation of the new man with a new consciousness. In our world the great error of our thought has been to divide our life between spiritual life and material life. But the great dream of Auroville, based on Sri Aurobindo's life-work, is to unite the two. With this reunion or marriage between Spirit and Matter we shall have truly the possibility of a new world and a new man, a universal and integral man. Auroville is an attempt to realise Sri Aurobindo's philosophy on the terrestrial plane: the integration of a total man....

Well, I think, the true democracy does not yet exist anywhere. In Auroville, however, all the institutes, economic, social, cultural, based on the concept of the Integral Man with a new consciousness, will assure a new democracy, where each person will have a special role in the decisions and actions of the township. And thus we shall also have a new form of political life.

Dr. Adiseshiah also referred to the fact that the UNESCO had three times successively and unanimously declared that "the great project of Auroville is a profound expression of the spirit of UNESCO", and urged that all the 135 member-states — the Governments, the private societies, foundations, etc. — should "observe the Sri Aurobindo Centenary Year which commences on 15 August 1972, and help the Sri Aurobindo Society in the development of Auroville in every possible way".⁴⁹

On 15 December 1970, the Auroville School was inaugurated, and this future-oriented human laboratory will exemplify the principle of freedom and free progress in education with even greater daring than at the

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, March 1971, pp. 116-7.

Ashram's Centre of Education. The architecture of the School too is tantalisingly futurist in a creative way, providing an environment worthy of the "children of God". The "Forecomers" have not only settled down but have been able to present a dramatic and dance sequence, based on Rod's poem 'The Artist before Dawn and the Dream of Victory', as part of the celebration of the second anniversary of the Auroville inauguration. After witnessing the sequence, K. D. Sethna wrote: "I saw colour and sound and gesture and movement mingling with the creative energy of the West with the rapt insight of India to make a new form for man's evolutionary unfolding". Another member of the audience, Jobst Muhling, recorded that "the audience was compelled to forget reality. Magically it felt itself drawn into a dream-world of perfect humanity".⁵⁰ The quality of the vision and voice of Rod's dramatic piece may be indicated by one or two passages:

The children float at dawn
toward the warm touch of reality
inside a magic dome
and the light grows within...
The future leapt into view
like blossoms opening in a garden
and the ancients who cared for them
from the first, watched their children grow...
On the city rises round the rim
as night's armour clatters to the ground
and in the utter silence
men of light noisily launch their ships
to the sun...

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 33, 36.

O the kingdom rises round the rim.⁵¹

How Auroville will evolve further and further and solve the central human problem of reconciling the need for human unity and harmony with the claims of human diversity and multiplicity, the need for order and the need for freedom, the need for power and the need for Grace, the need for a solid material base and the need for the life, mind and Spirit dimensions, how Auroville will find the means of endless self-growth and self-realisation and fill the proposed four sectors (industrial, residential, cultural, international) with shining purpose derived from the central source of light and life—the Lake and the Matrimandir—how sunflower-like all thoughts, all actions, all delights, all aspirations, all realisations, all, all will turn towards the Divine and receive the light of Truth and the warmth of Love, much of all this is yet wrapped in the future. But the divine seed was at last cast on Auroville's sacred soil when at the chosen spot the foundation stone of Matrimandir was laid on 21 February 1971. As visualised by Roger Anger, the Matrimandir will appear as an unsupported golden globe suspended in space, light filtering from top to bottom, an architectural lyric, a materialised meditation, a brazier of Aspiration from below being met by the downpour of Grace from Above. In its finished form, Matrimandir is expected to suggest symbolistically the emergence of the “golden sphere of consciousness out of the earth crater”, the whole story of life in its dynamic multifoliateness being reflected in the dance of movement on the golden discs exposed to the sun's rays. But Matrimandir will be no architectural marvel merely, something to gaze at and admire; it is to be verily a theatre of inner psychologi-

⁵¹ *ibid.*, February 1971, pp. 40-2.

cal exploration, self-discovery and self-realisation. Following one of the four pathways, the pilgrim will pass above the crater and make for the sun-world, reach the central dodecagon, and go beyond it to one of the four Halls of Meditation bathed in the sun's light. This will be the transforming chamber, the spiritual cyclotron; the Mind of Night hot-linked with the Mind of Light: one complete spectrum from the inconscient to the superconscient: the way up being also the way down, the whole secret of the cosmic play. The pilgrim, when he has charged and changed himself enough, enough for the day, can now go out to the Garden of Unity, the Banyan Tree and the mythic Lotus or lotus-shaped Vase. Matrimandir, whose construction is to be done in twelve stages spread over three or more years, will thus be structured into a symbol-dream in architecture, a marvel of beauty and harmony, the ensouled image of a mighty aspiration and its theatre of realisation. The whole complex of Matrimandir and its environs might very well strike the pilgrim as a three-dimensional recordation of the nectarean insights of *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *Savitri*. But this very grandeur of conception, the daring, the hope abounding, the faith abiding, can cause a little dizziness, and make men wonder whether such a paradisaical design can really be translated into actuality. "But get thee behind me. Doubt": the Great Adventure, which has the sanction and signature of the Supreme, cannot and must not fail:

for the future of poetry and the world depends now on the nature of something She is establishing here in Auroville...

but first the plowing, the growing and the tending of the fields divine...

And one must hope that soon, soon, the garden would grow "with an air on which may cling all love's responsible things".⁵²

V

Writing of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother has said with an all-sufficient succinctness:

What Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history
is not a teaching,
not even a revelation;
it is a decisive action
direct from the Supreme.⁵³

The 'teaching' is there, in overwhelming elaboration and packed opulence of divination, in the stupendous *Arya* sequences; the 'revelation' is blazed forth in *Savitri*. Yet Sri Aurobindo exceeds the *Arya* volumes, and exceeds *Savitri*. The poet, patriot and High-Priest of Revolution, the mystic, philosopher and Prophet of the Life Divine — the Force that moved them all is active still. The Ashram, the Centre of Education, and now, — Auroville! What other outer proof is needed to substantiate the Mother's affirmation? She has gone, indeed, further and declared from her summit of Yogic vision:

Since the beginning of earth history, Sri Aurobindo has always presided over the great earthly transformations, under one form or another, one name or another.⁵⁴

It has ever been obvious to those closely associated with

⁵² *ibid.*, June 1971, Gene's "A Poet's Letter from Auroville," addressed to Amal, pp. 334-5.

⁵³ *The Mother on Sri Aurobindo* (1961). ⁵⁴ *ibid.*

Sri Aurobindo or the Ashram that he is a Power, and not alone a Person, — and a Power issuing in Action. It is a power for self-transformation and, ultimately, for world-transformation. Although Sri Aurobindo has withdrawn from the material envelope that had been his body, his Power has been potently active in the earth-consciousness. To believe in the existence of this Power, to aspire to be a channel of its Manifestation, to realise this aspiration progressively: such could be our positive response to Sri Aurobindo.

There are those, however, for whom Sri Aurobindo is little more than the name and memory of a tremendous political force of sixty-five years ago, or the fabled name of a great Yogi who had taken his abode in South India at Pondicherry during the latter half of his terrestrial life. Even during his days of "retirement", people used to ask impatiently, "What is Sri Aurobindo doing?" — since, in the popular view, Yoga itself was not "action". The answer Aurobindonians used to give was that Sri Aurobindo had given the WORD, and the WORD was itself Power. The WORD was spread out in the six or seven volumes of the *Arya* magazine (1914-21), in hundreds of poems and sonnets, in thousands of letters, in the atomic "thoughts and aphorisms" and in the Sun-charged *Savitri*. There was his PRESENCE too, which was incommensurable Power. On *darśan* days and even on other days, that Presence was a felt reality of Power that ignited numberless clods of earth into burning braziers of aspiration and realisation. There was, above all, Sri Aurobindo's OCCULT INFLUENCE — unseen, unknown, but potent still, an immaculate Power that sent out its beneficent beams to the ends of the world, imparting sudden hope and courage

to soldiers on the battlefield, prophetic gleams of understanding to statesmen overcome by perplexity, rescuing lights to sadhaks in their spiritual dark nights, or unexpected illuminations to artists in their moments of doubt and defeat. This occult influence could, on crucial occasions, sway the course of events from behind the scenes, or get involved in our affairs without our being even aware of it—an invisible but alchemic participation, a power for change and transmutation and transfiguration. That occult Power is there still, and it is more active than ever, and is a continuous source of inspiration and force of transformation.

In the earlier part of Sri Aurobindo's life, the supreme problem was fighting the colonial power of Britain and winning political freedom for India. From the beginning Sri Aurobindo knew that it was not political freedom nor economic sufficiency but the recovery of the nation's soul that was the heart of the problem. Born on 15 August 1872, Sri Aurobindo had the Vision of the Mother—India as the Mother, as Bhavani, as Durga, as Bharati—as early as 1905, if not earlier. During his brief but decisive intervention in national politics during 1906-10, Sri Aurobindo awakened the slumbering soul of the nation to an appreciation of its high destiny; he also organised a secret revolutionary movement, besides participating in open political activity as a Nationalist. When the broad lines of action necessary for political liberation had been firmly laid down, Sri Aurobindo withdrew to Pondicherry to address himself to the more fundamental task of the soul's liberation, for without it the rest—political and economic freedom—must prove mere dead-sea fruit.

After two world wars, Indian independence came on

Sri Aurobindo's seventy-fifth birthday on 15 August 1947. Five years earlier, the Congress leaders had rejected Sri Aurobindo's advice regarding the Cripps Proposals, and so independence came coupled with the partition of the country, and the attendant bloodshed, the exodus of millions, and the immitigable misery. Sri Aurobindo could see clearly the dangers ahead, — dangers for India and the world. He saw the folly of the partition and the evil it might engender in the future: he saw the menacing aspects of Red China's emergence long before any statesman did: and he also had a clear vision of India's future, and of her future role as the Guru of the nations — after having, of course, first won by her own *tapasyā* and *siddhi* the right to such leadership.

Over twenty years after Sri Aurobindo's passing, the problem in India today is the supreme problem of survival in the face of internal weakness, disunity and disorder, and the possibility of massive aggression from without. Although during the years after independence, India has made a gallant effort at economic regeneration, what is most unfortunate is that, in the process of central planning for development, she has shackled and weakened herself with debt, aid-strings, debilitating habits, regional pulls and humiliating postures. Kashmir and 'cold war' politics, the Chinese invasion of 1962, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the Bangla Desh explosion of March 1971, the sudden spate of refugees, the victorious lightning war in December, the unfriendly or menacing postures of some of the foreign Powers, the rise in expenditure, the increase in unemployment, the inflationary pressures, the cumulative strain on the economy, all have — one way or another — helped to create the

current climate of anxiety and uncertainty in India; and the new generation that has come up since independence is angry, frustrated, intolerant, unconventional and uninhibited.

During the last many years there has been developing in India (and the world) a steadily worsening situation. After the 1967 General Elections especially, alarming symptoms of national ill-health have begun to appear — a catastrophic decline in standards of conduct, a frightening erosion of values and a sharp turn towards disorder. We have been witnessing the recrudescence of uncontrolled violence in thought, word and deed, the blatant display of sacrilege in many forms — the destruction of libraries, the disfigurement of statues, the vandalism in campuses, the molestation of beauty, the murder of innocence. The crash of all traditional loyalties, the quick spread of permissiveness, the easy diffusion of drug-peddling and drug-addiction, the itch to live fast and live dangerously, the refusal to think of the future — any future whatsoever! Indeed, what is happening around us now seems to be in reckless defiance of the rules as we had known them in our green youth. Children brought up in affluent or sophisticated families turn hippies (or even naxalites), rejecting the easy comforts of the parental home, and preferring an “outsider” or “outlaw” status to a secure niche in the Establishment. The French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions saw the old order of relationships between the aristocracy and the commoners, or the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, crumble in an instant. Today the traditional order of relationships between parents and children, between employers and labour, and even between teachers and pupils, is seen to crumble — and the current epi-

demic of violence and the unseemly blaze of action and opinion seem to be quite as revolutionary as the slogans and attitudes of masses of men who once swore by a Danton, a Lenin or a Mao Tse-tung. No doubt, many of the current forms of protest and nonconformity seem mere aberration; no doubt much inconvenience is caused, a lot of destruction too, and a general sense of doom as well. Nor are Nature's moods more reassuring. A cyclone, a tidal wave — a hundred thousand people washed away; a Himalayan river in spate — and buses, cars, whole villages swept into the gaping ravine; an earthquake — a city razed to the ground; an epidemic, or air-poisoning, or river-poisoning, or food-poisoning — with numberless victims. The human mind, albeit infinite in its faculty for comprehension, suddenly quails before these abnormalities of life and Nature. At least, at least, these happenings should make us pause and think and cultivate a sense of crisis. The mere repetition of the abracadabra of past formulations will not do any longer. The outer mould built assiduously by human egoism is visibly disintegrating, and so we needs must learn the lesson intended, and grapple with the ego-shell within ourselves. The fight today has therefore to be waged, not against a colonial power, but against all that is false within ourselves. We have thus to change ourselves first before we can feel pure enough, or strong enough, to change others or change the environment. A civilisation in the process of breaking up could also be the raw material for a new civilisation in the making. One has to seize the moment of ripeness, one has to discover and know oneself, and then one may be able to look beyond the moment in a mood of faith and collaborate with the forces working obscurely — yet also irresistibly — for a

radical, even a revolutionary, change in earth nature and of course human nature.

In its externals, "Sri Aurobindo's Action" is a movement generated from Sri Aurobindo Ashram since mid-1970, a Society with office-bearers, rules and subscriptions — even as a human being needs to have a physical body and a name and various adhesions and propensities. But just as a human being is quintessentially the indwelling soul, the informing Spirit, for without it the body is nothing, the mind is nothing, the passions, emotions and sensibilities are nothing, so too "Sri Aurobindo's Action" is a Force, a Force intent on effecting a revolutionary change in our way of thinking and living. Writing on the 'spiritual revolution', Sri Aurobindo said in *Thoughts and Glimpses* (1917):

The changes we see in the world today are intellectual, moral, physical in their ideal and intention:

the spiritual revolution waits for its hour and throws up meanwhile its waves here and there.

Until it comes,

the sense of others cannot be understood
and till then

all interpretations of present happening
and forecast of man's future
are vain things.

For its nature, power, event are that which will determine the next cycle of our humanity.

This 'spiritual revolution' implies verily a breakthrough in the province of mental life comparable to the revolutionary breakthroughs in atomic physics and molecular biology. Crack the mould of the ego, and the waters of consciousness will flow together; and all soul-division

and all fragmentation and enfeeblement of society, nation and the human aggregate, all would be superseded by the godheads of harmony, strength, social well-being and human unity. To participate in the movement of "Sri Aurobindo's Action", one must be armed with the faith and conviction that there is indeed a great Force behind the "Action", that we should make ourselves channels of this Force, lose ourselves in it — not resist it, nor even be neutral or indifferent in our attitude, but actively advance it by becoming one with it.

The sense of crisis: an intuitive recognition of the Force, the evolutionary Force, that is operating to bring out of the crisis itself a new dispensation: the sovereign faith, the limitless courage to meet the crisis through identification with the Force: the participation in the spiritual revolution which is the only ultimate solvent for all the maladies that beset humanity: the emergence of the future man and the self-reliant self-poised society of the future. While all this might very well be the programme of action for effecting the difficult passage from the flawed excitements and chronic frustrations of ego-centric life to the fullness and felicity of the promised "Life Divine", yet in the immediate context, India and the world need to accomplish the bare feat of survival so that the higher possibilities could have a chance of realisation in the future. Hence, on an emergency footing as it were, "Sri Aurobindo's Action" is conceived in the first instance as a programme of spiritual rearmament and Karma Yoga, determined to set baffled and demoralised India again on her feet before Sri Aurobindo's birth centenary of 15 August 1972. In the wider background of evolution from the mental to the supramental stage, here in India — in India, because India sums up in her-

self the problems and possibilities of humanity — the first decisive battle for sanity and survival has to be fought and won. But of course the “action” — which is basically a spiritual and even a supramental action — would by no means exhaust itself or suddenly arrest its progress on a particular date. A first necessary step is not the final step as well; the winning of a crucial first battle is not victory in the war itself — the war against ignorance and incapacity and death. A significant milestone peremptorily beckons us, but only to facilitate the next leap forward, and further and farther drives onward. Sri Aurobindo’s Action must thus continue till the whole alchemic process of transformation of consciousness is completed and the Life Divine in all its panoply and plenitude is securely set going upon earth.

Sri Aurobindo’s Action! — “a decisive action direct from the Supreme”! At this time, in the inner theatre or Kurukshetra within every one of us: in India, this ancient consecrated land, ancient yet not a back-number, divided and weakened and apparently decadent, yet alive somehow and indeed holding the promise of the future for herself and for the world: in the multi-tiered theatre — individual, national, global — this momentous “action” is being waged, for the future, all our future, is at stake!⁵⁵

A Force has certainly gone into action; the action has been there all along, only now openly recognised and named; and we call it Sri Aurobindo’s Force because he first gave the clue to its nature, the nature of its dynamic functioning. But really the Force is inherent in the very structure of the cosmos, and is involved in its dy-

⁵⁵ The reader is also referred to my fuller article on ‘Sri Aurobindo’s Action’ in *Sri Aurobindo Circle*, 27th Number (1971), pp. 35-43.

namics of evolution. For millions of years the earth has been in the great evolutionary travail. The blazing sphere cooled, water appeared, and the first primitive forms of life, and vegetation, and the rumblings of the animal world — and at last Homo Sapiens, the thinking, grumbling, blundering creature that is also pining and dreaming and aspiring Man. But the earth is much more than an orbiting sphere in space, and man is much more than an animal careering towards extinction. And there is to-day the same evolutionary push towards new horizons, the tearing of the mental lid to reach the higher god-heads of consciousness.

Let there be no doubt about it: this Force would work us, if we won't work with it. It is a Force that has been there with us for a long time — quiescent for ages — but now it is coming out into the open, for the world crisis has made such an open intervention imperative, and the first phase of the Action has to be concluded, at least in large part, before Sri Aurobindo's birth centenary.

If in this crisis we are to prove worthy instruments of Sri Aurobindo's "action" — which is essentially a spiritual action — the need first is to cleanse ourselves, remembering the Master's stern admonition:

In the Hour of God
 cleanse thy soul
 of all self-deceit and hypocrisy
 and vain self-flattery
that thou mayest look straight
 into thy spirit
 and hear that
 which summons it.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ *The Hour of God* (1959), p. 3.

Next, the need is to invoke the Mighty Mother — Supreme Creatrix — Parashakti — to manifest Herself, and make of us hero-warriors who will not flinch from the Battle of the Future:

MOTHER DURGA!

In the battle of life, in India's battle,
we are warriors commissioned by thee;
Mother, give to our heart and mind
a titan's strength, a titan's energy,
to our soul and intelligence
a God's character and knowledge...

MOTHER DURGA!

Enter our bodies in thy Yogic strength.
We shall become thy instruments,
thy sword slaying all evil,
thy lamp dispelling all ignorance...
Make thyself manifest.⁵⁷

Then, "in God's transforming hour", all things shall change —

The Mighty Mother shall take birth in Time
And God be born into the human clay...
Then shall the Truth supreme be given to men.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Translated from the original Bengali by Nolini Kanta Gupta.

⁵⁸ *Savitri*, p. 791.

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1. *Sri Aurobindo on Himself and on the Mother* (1953)
2. *Savitri*, followed by the Author's Letters on the Poem (1954)
3. *The Life Divine* (1955; 1960)
4. *On Yoga I: The Synthesis of Yoga* (1955)
5. *On the Veda* (1956)
6. *On Yoga II: Tome One* (1958)
7. *On Yoga II: Tome Two* (1958)
8. *Essays on the Gita* (1959)
9. *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination* (1962)

In respect of Sri Aurobindo's dramatic and poetical writings (except *Savitri*), I have generally relied on the following editions:

- Collected Poems and Plays*, Two Volumes (1942)
- Poems Past and Present* (1952)
- Last Poems* (1952)
- Ilion*, an Epic in Quantitative Hexameters (1957)
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- Poems from Bengali* (1956)
- Poems from Vidyapati* (1956)
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Hymns to the Mystic Fire (1952)
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Letters of Sri Aurobindo, Third Series (On Poetry and Literature), 1949
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The Mother (1928; 1940)
The Riddle of This World (1943)
The Problem of Rebirth (1969)
The Yoga and Its Objects (1921; 1931)
Bases of Yoga (1941)
Lights on Yoga (1942)
More Lights on Yoga (1948)
The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth (1952)
The Mind of Light (the American edition of the above), with an Introduction by Robert A. McDermott (1971)

Centenary Edition

The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo are now being issued by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, in 30 volumes in the definitive Birth Centenary Library Edition. Of these, except volumes 27 and 30, the remaining 28 volumes have already come out:

1. *Bande Mataram*
2. *Karmayogin*
3. *The Harmony of Virtue: Early Cultural Writings*
4. *Writings in Bengali*
5. *Collected Poems: The Complete Poetical Works*
6. *Collected Plays and Short Stories, Part One*
7. *Collected Plays and Short Stories, Part Two*
8. *Translations*
9. *The Future Poetry, and Letters on Poetry, Literature and Art*
10. *The Secret of the Veda*
11. *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*
12. *The Upanishads: Texts, Translations and Commentaries*

13. *Essays on the Gita*
14. *The Foundations of Indian Culture*
15. *Social and Political Thought* (The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity, War and Self-Determination)
16. *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*, and Other Writings
17. *The Hour of God*, and Other Writings
18. *The Life Divine*, Book One and Book Two Part One
19. *The Life Divine*, Book Two Part Two
20. *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Parts One and Two
21. *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Parts Three and Four
22. *Letters on Yoga*, Part One
23. *Letters on Yoga*, Parts Two and Three
24. *Letters on Yoga*, Part Four
25. *The Mother*
26. *On Himself*
28. *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, Part One
29. *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, Parts Two and Three
- (27. *Supplementary*)
- (30. *Index*)

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The works of the Mother are in a category apart. Of unique significance in themselves, they also throw direct light on Sri Aurobindo's life, philosophy, poetry and Yoga. The more important of the works available in English are the following:

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 Tchmi. *Poems* (1952)

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Magazine Literature

The magazine literature on Sri Aurobindo is immense, and is still growing. Not only are there journals in several languages sponsored by disciples or admirers, but other learned periodicals the world over are also increasingly evincing intelligent interest in his life and work. While it is beyond our scope here to attempt a comprehensive list, the more important Aurobindonian journals are mentioned below, and most of these are published from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry:

Sri Aurobindo Mandir Annual, the first number appearing on Sri Aurobindo's 70th birthday on 15 August 1942.

Sri Aurobindo Circle, the first Annual appearing on 24 April 1945.

The Advent, a Quarterly Journal, the first number appearing on 21 February 1944.

Mother India, first a fortnightly, later a monthly, now in its 24th year.

The Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (originally 'Bulletin of Physical Education'), a Quarterly in English-French-Hindi, since February 1949.

- World Union*, a Quarterly Journal.
Equals One (=1), a Quarterly Journal of Auroville.
Gazette Aurovilienne, a bi-monthly report.
Sri Aurobindo's Action, a monthly Journal.
All India Magazine, a monthly Journal giving extracts from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.
Srinwantu, a Quarterly Journal in English.
Bartika, a Quarterly in Bengali.
Purodha, Hindi Monthly, and Bengali Quarterly, for Youth.
Dipti, a Kannada Quarterly.
Arul, a Tamil Bi-Annual.
Dakshina and Bal Dakshina, a Gujarati Quarterly.
Sanjivan, a Marathi Quarterly.
Arka, a Telugu Quarterly.
Agnishikha, a Hindi Monthly.
Sri Aravinda Karmadhara, a Hindi Monthly (published from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch, New Delhi-16).

Bibliographies

There is a useful bibliography in A. B. Purani's *Life of Sri Aurobindo*, giving in chronological sequence the dates of publication of Sri Aurobindo's works. There is also a brief annotated bibliography by Robert A. McDermott in the new edition of Sri Aurobindo's *The Mind of Light* (New York, 1971). Finally, each volume of the Birth Centenary Library edition has a very informative bibliographical note, covering the contents of the respective volumes.

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